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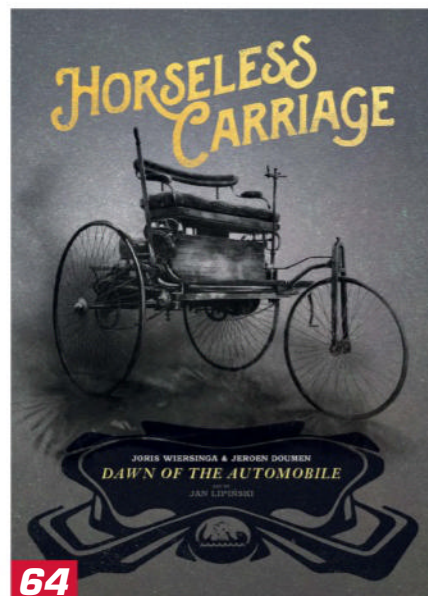
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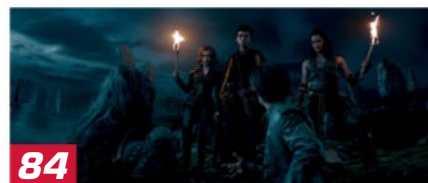
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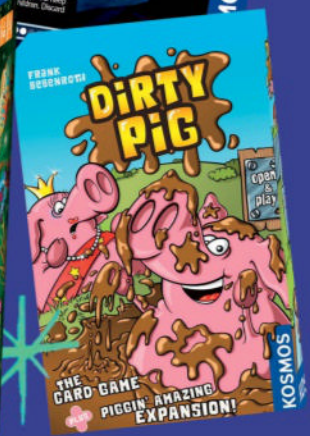
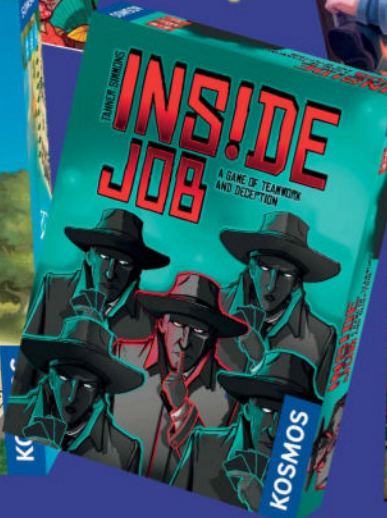
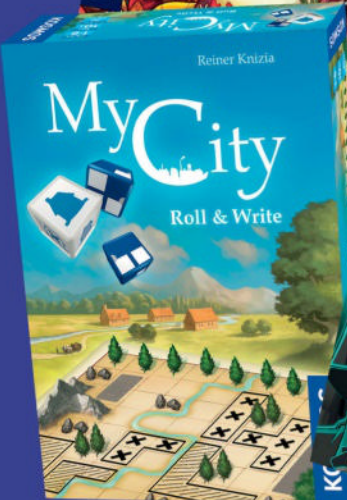


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## EDITORIAL

### EDITOR

**Christopher John Eggett**

01778 392 400

christophereggett@warnersgroup.co.uk

### ONLINE EDITOR

**Charlie Pettit**

01778 395 018

charlie.pettit@warnersgroup.co.uk

### CONTRIBUTORS

**Debbie Brown, Tim Clare, Jenny Cox, Richard Jansen-Parkes, Dan Jolin, Chris Lowry, Ben Maddox, David Parlett, Richard Simpson Alexandra Sonechkina, Charlie Theel, Matthew Vernal, Chad Wilkinson**

### DESIGN

**Mike Carr**

### SUBSCRIBER COVER IMAGE

**Homeworld Fleet Command**  
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## ADVERTISING

### TO ADVERTISE PLEASE CALL

**COMMERCIAL MANAGER**

**Charlotte Lewis** 01778 391 129

charlotte.lewis@warnersgroup.co.uk

### PRODUCTION MANAGER

**Nicola Glossop** 01778 392 420

nicola.glossop@warnersgroup.co.uk

### PRODUCTION ASSISTANT

**Charlotte Bamford** 01778 395081

charlotte.bamford@warnersgroup.co.uk

## MARKETING

### MARKETING MANAGER

**Katherine Brown** 01778 395 092

katherine.brown@warnersgroup.co.uk

### MARKETING EXECUTIVE

**Luke Hider** 01778 395085

luke.hider@warnersgroup.co.uk

## PUBLISHED BY

**PUBLISHER Claire Ingram**

claire.ingram@warnersgroup.co.uk

### Warners Group Publications PLC

The Maltings, West Street, Bourne,  
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# Welcome



**NOW  
PLAYING...**  
*Moonlight  
on Roseville  
Beach*

**W**elcome to this expansive issue of Tabletop Gaming. We're celebrating *Gloomhaven* getting a roleplaying game version – taking what was joked about as the world's heaviest game that people didn't finish, to one you simply can't finish. We speak to Isaac Childres about creating the game, it's use of *Gloomhaven* components an how, in some ways, it the vision he had for *Gloomhaven* from the start.

Plus it's a mega issue for reviews. We have huge reviews of Splotter's *Horseless Carriage* (another masterpiece?), the award-winning *Ark Nova* (does it live up to the hype?), and the elusive *Sleeping Gods* (does it reinvent storytelling for games?). On top of that we have a *Dungeon & Dragons* double-header, with the heist-focused *Keys From the Golden Vault* and a two-page deep-dive into *Dungeons & Dragons Honor Among Thieves*. Does the movie stumble where so many have before, or land a critical hit?

**Christopher John Eggett** Editor

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## QUICKSTART

“Ever since *Gloomhaven* came out, I've been encouraging fans to tell their own stories with the system

“This is very much inspired by the final act of the original *Star Wars* movie

“It doesn't simply translate the game to cinema. It captures the *spirit* of the game

**Isaac Childres, on *Gloomhaven The Roleplaying Game*, p24 ▶**

**Caleb Grace, on *Star Wars The Deck Building Game*, p30 ▶**

**Dan Jolin, on *Honor Among Thieves*, p84 ▶**



## LORCANA RULES ANNOUNCED: HOW TO PLAY DISNEY'S TRADING CARD GAME

The month worlds of TCG players looking for another way to spend all their money, and the Disney fandoms collided once again to discover how exactly the new *Lorcana* trading card game is played. And we have a launch date, 18th August 2023.

There has been huge speculation about how the game would work in practice, with many assumptions coming from those who are familiar with other TCGs. Would the coloured 'inks' be the same as mana types in *Magic: The Gathering*? Would a Disney game really ask you to knock players out in a classic head to head style, or chase some other goal, like *KeyForge*? Yet, it turns out while *Lorcana* has some similarities with other trading cards games, its own system is a very inventive and streamlined race.

Players are attempting to collect 20 Lore – a kind of victory point – to win the game. The only thing stopping them playing cards and gaining lore by exerting them is the other player. Combat is as expected, with players being able to target other characters who are already exerted for the round, removing them from future turns if their attack value is greater than the defence value. Players track damage with tokens.

The most exciting part of the new system is the 'ink' system – comparable to mana of other games. Here, instead of having its own card type, 'ink', the game's currency, can be created from any card with the ink marking around its cost. Players play these

(usually character cards) face down, and they become one useable ink for paying for future cards. This makes the choice of dropping a card to be ink or keeping it in your hand to play later a delicious choice to make!

This mix of a points race of *KeyForge*, card removal as currency like *Flesh and Blood*, and 'solving' the 'mana problem' that is at the heart of games like *Magic: The Gathering*, we've got a slick and fast playing game on our hands.



We can't wait to get hold of our own cards to start building our own decks.

## KNOW YOUR NUMBERS

70

– how old Klaus Teuber, the creator of Settlers of Catan, was when he died earlier this month

£32K

– the amount raised by The Royal Limited, a new wallet game, this month on Kickstarter

1,000,000

– Users on Tabletopia, the virtual games platform

4

Million – copies of Gloomhaven sold worldwide

5

Million – copies of Azul sold worldwide



## We asked...

After the sad passing of Klaus Teuber, we ask, when did you first play *Settlers of Catan*?

## You said...

Friend of mine had an early UK import copy with the English translation of the rules in a little photocopied leaflet and we played the heck out of it. Great game.  
[@morthrai](#)

We moved from London in 2008 and whilst our furniture was delayed, four of us sat playing *Catan* in our spartan new home over and over: Loved it!  
[@RedRich79](#)

It's involved a person who knew what they were doing and 3 of us that didn't and new to the hobby c2005. The player that knew what they were doing traded away lots of their rare resource only to then play the monopoly development card and take them back. A hard lesson was learnt.  
[@StartPlayer](#)

My first punt at it was in Canada, where we played the Star Trek reskin. to this day, I continue to think of half of the resources as dilithium crystals.  
[@SeanFsmith](#)

I don't quite remember everything but a cousin introduced us. It was the older version of *Catan* and we played it over and over.  
[@jamesreid860](#)

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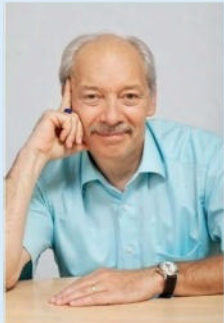


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## CATAN CREATOR KLAUS TEUBER DIES AGE 70



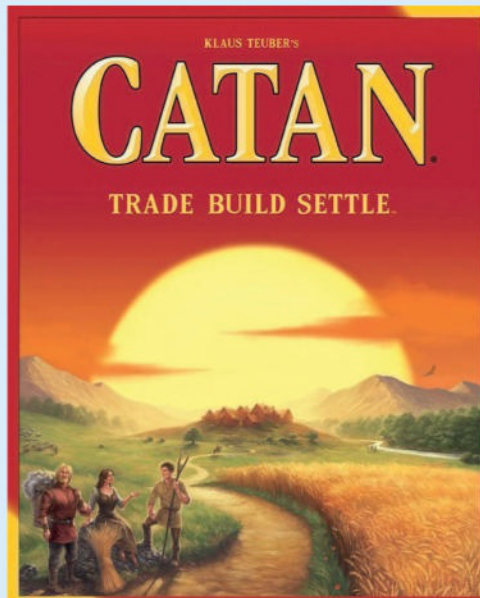
If you're reading this magazine, it's in part because of a game called *Catan*. You might not have even played the game itself, but everyone in the hobby is touched by the effects of its wild success. The game was first published in 1995, won the Spiel des Jahres, has launched numerous expansions, a huge (and pricey) 3D version, and has

sold over 32 million copies across 40 languages. It's why some of the biggest publishers exist at the scale they now do, and why many of us know hobby games exist at all, it's one of the reasons the hobby is as big as it is now.

On the 1st April 2023 Klaus Teuber, the designer of *Catan*, passed away at the age of 70. For many *Catan* was their way into the hobby, and so Teuber's passing is a sad one, marking their own place in the hobby. He will be missed.

Catan Studios offered these words: "We encourage you to honor Klaus' memory by being kind to one another, pursuing your creative passions fearlessly, and enjoying a game with your loved ones. Klaus' impact on the world of gaming will never be forgotten."

We'll be exploring Teuber's impact on the hobby and how he will be remembered in the next issue.



## FUNKO UNVEILS STAR WARS RIVALS



Funko Games offers us another reason to get big headed with the release of *Star Wars Rivals*. This is a collectable card game with a number of classic figures from both sides of the force. Each booster will contain one figure and one set of cards. The gameplay focuses around collecting location cards and involves rolling a cool little four sided dice. At the time of writing the premium set is planned to be released at £20 with booster boxes at £5. There is a new art direction too – gone is the classic Funko look, replaced with a more dynamic and angular models.



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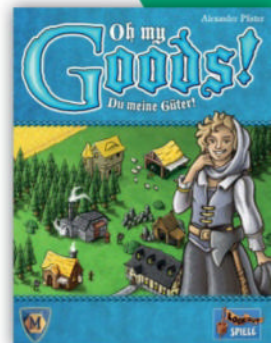
## 1 OATH: CHRONICLES OF EMPIRE AND EXILE

A game that offers part wargame, part generative campaign, all wrapped up in Eurogame sensibilities. *Oath* sees players take the role of an exile or the chancellor and attempt to take control of the world through conquest. The game is the attempt to overthrow the current chancellor by finding a 'vision' which will reveal your win condition. It's a tactical joy, but beyond that the world changes with every win or loss. New locations come out for next time, and the world deck (the main one you're drawing from) is changed. The dream is that you play this enough and never reset it so that the world that anyone in the future plays is one effected by everyone who ever sat at the table with you. A magic idea.



## 2 OH MY GOODS!

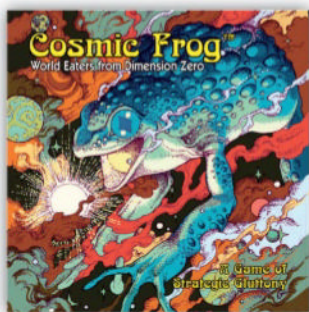
One deck of cards does so much. From the designer who I believe should be considered the modern master of Eurogames, Alexander Pfister (frankly Rosenberg and Feld get nowhere near in my mind). *Oh my Goods!* is a little economic game about building a village economy tableau, creating good and selling it for money to build more of your village. It also uses a poker 'river' style reveal for the resources naturally available each round, so there's a slight betting element to the game too. The twist upon all of this is that the cards face up are either resources when discarded or buildings when played for the tableau. When face down on other cards, they're resources worth an amount of money. This then leans the deck in a certain direction, making for a brain burning game in a tiny box.



# 10 OF THE BEST OF CHRIS' FAVOURITE GAMES

With the next issue being my last as editor of this fine magazine I thought I would share my all-time top ten games.

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**



## 3 COSMIC FROG

Big frog wrestling is the name of the game here. You play a giant intergalactic amphibian attempting to secure planetary resources in your gullet by hopping around a double-layers hex map and gobbling stuff up. Get them home and place them in your vault to gain points. This assumes someone else doesn't absolutely spear you from one side of the planet to the other. Or off the edge, into space, or, indeed into deep space. Once you're out there others can raid your vault for resources. Before that of course, when you're punched in the stomach you frog vomits up resources, ready for the other to collect. Bonkers? Yes. The most fun you can have a frog in a board game? Also yes, for my money at least.

## 4 CARCASSONNE

Look, it's a classic for a reason. It's the one that sticks in my head and the one that brought me to the hobby. Add a million expansions for an insane three hour game that sees a dragon eat meeples, sudden auctions for tiles, building towers to steal other's farmers and denying them end game points. Once you've turned this simple gateway game into a megastructure of a Euro, you've got something really special. Let it get out of control and see if the wheels ever come off!





# 5 MÖRK BORG

Probably the reasons I like my roleplaying games short, deadly and beautifully made. *MÖRK BORG* is the game of metal album covers, low lives and high stakes. It's a beautiful thing to read and is

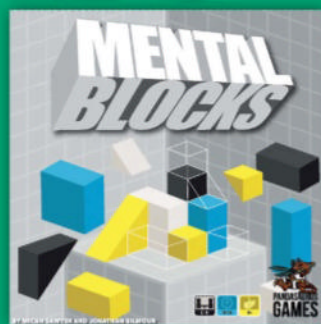
often dismissed as a 'art book'. What it actually offers is a way to read the game with only one mechanical element on each page, beautifully presented. This is a game of 'get the vibe, get the game' and comes with an overarching world changing mechanic where a dice is rolled every day to see if the world is any closer to ending. A simple system, tons of flavour, and over 1000 community produced adventures, extras and classes. If you wanted to know what it was like getting in on the ground floor for *D&D* in 1979, this is pretty close.



# 6 MENTAL BLOCKS

In a true game of perspective, *Mental Blocks* offers you and your friends a great

way to have really silly arguments about where exactly the blue sloped foam block goes. Each player is given a perspective card, which shows how a three dimensional shape should look from a single side. Then, against time, everyone has to use different coloured foam blocks to create the correct shape, with only the information they have on their card. Naturally, you're not always looking at the right side, and it's a real test of communication (obviously you can't show each other your cards). Plus, there's a 'traitor' mode where someone is trying to run out the clock by subtly putting the wrong pieces in place – without getting caught.



# 7 TUNNEL GOONS

The actual best roleplaying game of all time. A super simple system that invites inventive and quick-witted play. There's no rules-lawyering here, as there's barely any rules, and everything that's risky really can hurt. The

adventures that get written for *Tunnel Goons* (whether authored by Nate Treme, or others) tend to be whimsical, good natured, and designed for a wide audience. It's the game that I've introduced so many people to roleplaying with because it's simply so fast and simple to get up and running with. Perfect.



# 8 NECROMOLDS

It's war, but squishy. Make some monsters out of playdough using specialist 'spell books'

and then have them wander towards one another until they clash, causing one side to be officially splatted. The game uses a dice rolling, rerolling and matching to activate each unit type – meaning your team composition is important from the off. It's a surprisingly smart little wargaming entry that gives you the visceral thrill of actually destroying your opponents creatures. Plus, then the bodies hit the floor they become terrain. One to keep an eye on for the reprint and future expansions.



# 9 DUNGEON DEGENERATES

Acid vomit art style from a real punk synthesised into an expansive adventure game of fighting the cops and exploring

the huge world in front of you. Modelled on something like those old JRPGS such as Final Fantasy, but with a much more pleasing aesthetic, there's plenty of crunch, randomness and storytelling to explore through the campaign. The writing is hilarious and the choices you need to make on your adventure are tough. If you can keep the doom level down there's plenty to see, if not, it might be a short trip through the mind of Sean Aaberg.



# 10 THE KING IS DEAD

Peer Sylvester has had plenty

of kind words said about him and this game. Here we are trying to take control of Britain after the death of the king by deciding battles in various regions and taking advisors from the board to our courts. If you have the most advisors of a type (English, Welsh, or Scottish) regions they have taken will count to your victory – but because advisors are taken from the board you're always weakening your side's position. A head scratching good bit of fun that can withstand hours of replays.





# CARDBOARD MANIFESTO

## WHEN TWO IS ACTUALLY A CROWD

This month we're taking a swipe at the great pretenders of our hobby – those games that say they can play nice at two, but simply can't

Words by **Richard Simpson**

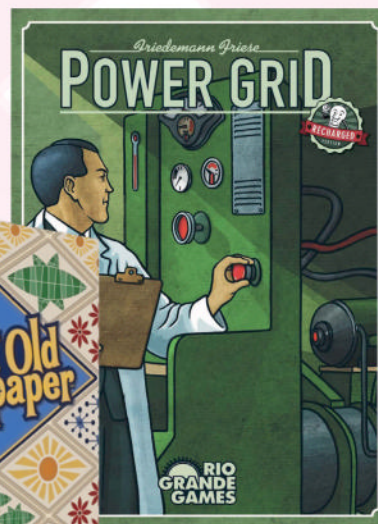
**D**o me a favour if you would? Take a minute to take a good look at the games in your collection and all the treasures that say they start at two players. It's ok. I'll wait while you do it. Now some of them, like your *Blitzkriegs*, *Godtears*, *Ashes and Armadas* of this world, are designed to be played with two players. They click with their back and forths, their tactical moving give and take. You feel like you are facing off against each other in a struggle of wits and intelligence and when you claim victory you have the right to be a wonderful bad winner. You are then allowed to remind your opponent at every point you can over the next few hours that you were the top dog, the big cheese, the appropriate metaphor. These are arena type encounters where two people enter and only one leaves, and we love them for it. We know where we stand with the strictly two player games.

Then you get the undecided, the ones that aren't so sure. The '2-' games. The '2-' comes in all shapes and sizes. Maybe it's a majestic cooperative campaign game like *Jaws of the Lion* or *Resident Evil 3*, where you can work as a team and strive together to beat the big bad and where more players just mean more bad guys. Or *Wingspan*, where regardless of the number of players, you're finding fowl on your own with minimal interaction. Or maybe it's a box of light and cheeky card based fun like *Point Salad*, which wants a crowd around you numbering your vegetables and chuckling, while at the same time telling you it only takes two to count a pepper. Maybe it's *Scythe*, a behemoth of a game that requires you to pull the dining table apart and fish out the dusty wooden extension in order to make the table big enough to fit all of the various boards it comes with. *Scythe* is one of the ultimate examples of the long distance two-player game where you have to text each

other after you've taken your turn. Some of these games want you to think they cater from the game night partner friendly to the game night party friendly, when what they should do is to tell us what they're really thinking.

You get close enough to the badges these '2-' games are wearing and you'll see that someone has been messing with the numbers and stuck a 2- badge where there maybe should not be. It irks me somewhat. So let me expand by giving you some specific examples. Are you sitting down? Have you taken a deep breath? Do you have your pitchfork ready? Okay. Here goes..

*Root* is a disappointing two player endeavour that I'm sure has people wondering about its love and appeal if your first experience is only played with cats and birds. I simply refuse to play that game with less than three players if I can avoid it. It's far too one-sided to make playing as the birds any more than an uphill struggle, though with the Vagabond and the Forest Alliance in tow, it becomes a thing of calculated beauty. *The Captain is Dead* needs a couple more people to hear you scream in space so it plays more like Star Trek and less like Red Dwarf. Even *Power Grid* becomes a bidless endeavour, where the only reason you head towards each other in the map is because of how lonely you can get being out there, shovelling coal and trying to do lots and lots of maths while waiting forever for phase two to kick in. *That Old Wallpaper* needs a functioning bot in order to play two players, something difficult to cover up with a coat of emulsion. Funnily enough, both *Power Grid* and *Root* introduced variations to make the two player game workable. The Prosecution rests, Your Honour.



I know, before you scream at the page that there are great games that play at different player counts. It's called

*Kingdomino*.

I'm not naive, I understand that from a commercial point of view telling a potential customer that three isn't a crowd but a necessity, is enough to have the game placed back on the shelf and something else considered instead. As someone who reviews games, there is something that fills me with a touch of trepidation when the box tells me I need to invite the other two members of my Bee Gee tribute act to the house in order to truly understand the vision of the designer whose works I've been sent. However, I would rather play a game as it was intended as opposed to how it is marketed. Are you aware that when reviewers state that a game 'shines at four players' what we're really saying is that it's maybe not that great at two? I am also pretty sure the same designer would want me to be experiencing the full bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich of their invention, and that makes me wonder if the boxes should include a 'Best At' to give some guidance.

It's not necessarily about honesty, it's more about living up to the designer's original vision. I'm sure they would much rather have a table of people joyously engaged in their cardboard than wondering where the tomatoes are. Make me play the best version of your game, confident that your four player game is going to leave an impression instead of a disappointed whimper at two. 🍅



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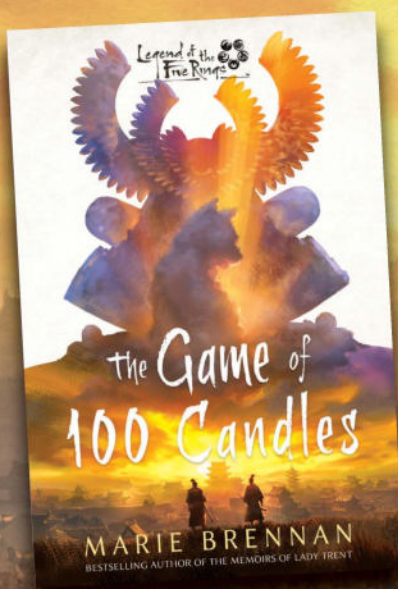
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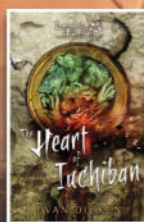
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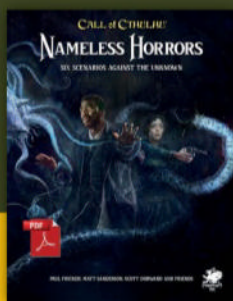
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# Role Call

Want to hear all about the most exciting for tabletop RPGs waiting on the horizon?  
Time to read **ROLE CALL!**

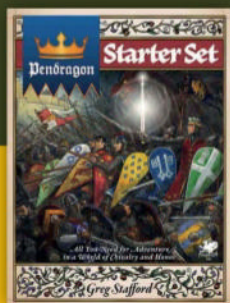
Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**



## CALL OF CTHULHU: NAMELESS HORRORS

This collection contains six spooky CoC scenarios scattered across the many centuries of Cthulhu mythos settings. According to the publisher, *Nameless Horrors* is packed with creatures “meant to keep even the most seasoned of Investigators on their toes.” So, maybe print off a few spare character sheets just in case...

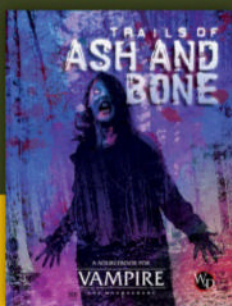
Chaosium | £36



## PENDRAGON RPG: STARTER SET

Set in the mythical past of King Arthur's Britain, *Pendragon* aims to capture the idea of chivalry, romance, and all other things knight-ey. The game has been around since the mid-80s, but this new boxed set aims to give new players an easy place to jump in and get questing.

Chaosium | £28



## VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - TRAILS OF ASH AND BONE

Boasting a quartet of blood-soaked adventures, *Trails of Ash and Bone* offers a way for groups to sink their fangs into *V:TM* without extensive prep. Most importantly, though, one of the adventures is set in Birmingham, UK. If a book offers you a chance to play as Brummie vampires, you have to take it, right?

Renegade Game Studios | £34



## THE LORD OF THE RINGS RPG

There are plenty of *LotR* RPGs out there, but this latest effort from Free League aims to blend the majesty of their recent *One Ring* game with the accessibility of the *D&D 5E* ruleset. Expect plenty of new rules, systems, and character options, as well as a bucket-load of beautiful art.

Free League | £39



## WARHAMMER 40,000 ROLEPLAY: IMPERIUM MALEDICTUM

It's only been a few years since we last saw a new *40k* RPG, but *Imperium Maledictum* promises to bring plenty of new ideas to the table. Early signs point to a d100-based system similar to *Cubicle 7*'s latest shot at the *Warhammer Fantasy RPG*, but with more explosive bolters.

Cubicle 7 | £49.99



HAVE YOU PLAYED?

# DIMENSION

This family game is a great downtime classic, and more than a load of balls

Words by Christopher John Eggett



**B**alls. A shape antithetical to the nature of board games, surely? In a hobby where the cube reigns supreme you'd expect these rolling nuisances to be shunned for all but the best uses. They're very much the untamable pea on the plate of gaming.

And yet, here, they're at the centre of a tasty little puzzle game that will get everyone into the spirit of these spherical nuisances. Let's roll with it then, and find a way round to loving the added dimension they bring to this absolute classic.

## WHAT IS IT?

In *Dimension*, a very classic Kosmos offering, you will be stacking balls of various colours in

an attempt to get points. You'll have a circular board with a few gaps to hold your variously coloured balls.

The balls come in red, green, blue, black and white – with three of each at your disposal. In front of this on the same board are seven holes which you can rest a single ball in.

When the sand timer starts you'll begin stacking these balls into those holes and then on to a second layer, which has room for three balls without any falling off. Finally a third ball can sit on top of all of these. I'm telling you this in some detail because this describes all of the interactions between balls in the game that you'll need to worry about once the challenge cards come out.

When the challenge cards are dealt at the start of a round they might tell you a variety

of different things you need to achieve, and you gain points for each of them that you have completed. These cards will tell you that you can't have any orange balls touching black ones, or that no white ball may be above a blue one, or that no other colour may be below green.

When it comes to building the little pyramid of balls you have to consider the three dimensional shape you're creating. A little like a less stressful version of personal favourite *Mental Blocks*, this game revolves around working out how the connections are made between each point. For example, if you need to avoid orange and white balls touching one another, then you have to remember what's in the middle of the pile, as any touching between the two will offer minus points.



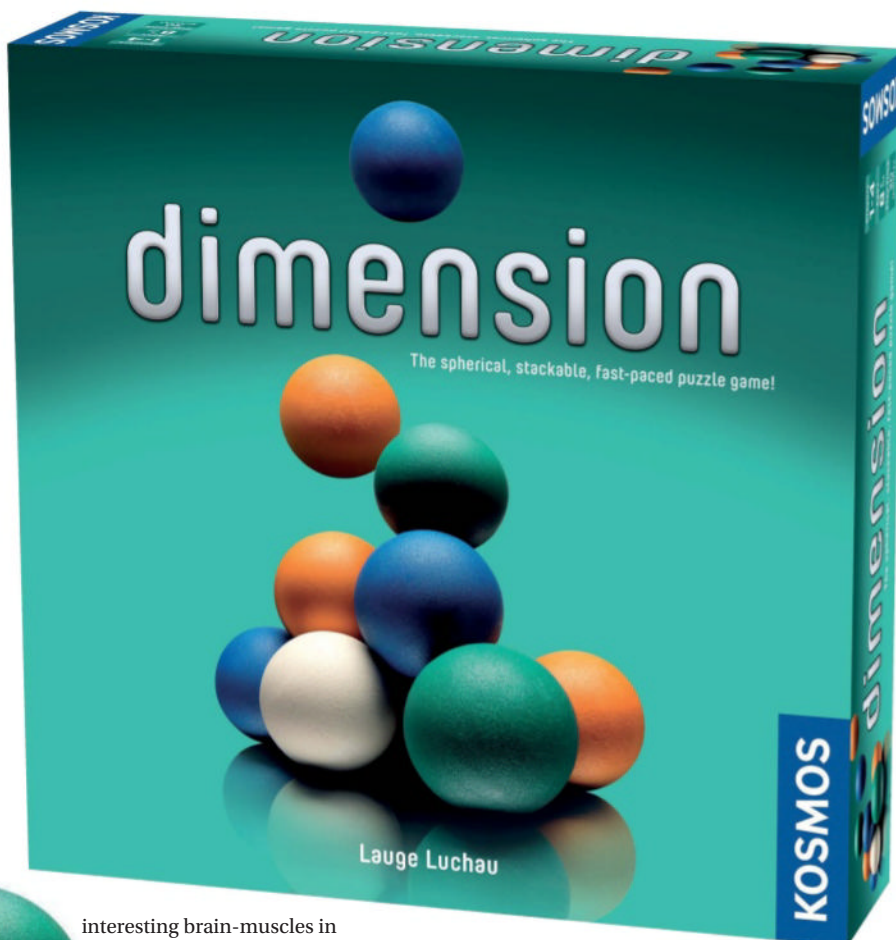
Of course, you're doing this against the clock. Flip a sand timer and everyone is off to the races trying to work out which balls can go where. The timer of a minute might seem generous enough to solve six (or sometimes less) card's worth of criteria – but it can be really tricky for some players to get it all done in time. It's this pressure where people start to muck up around the table, and the groans of realisation once the sand settles and the scores are to be allocated.

## WHY SHOULD YOU PLAY IT?

*Dimension* is one of those games that if you come to it with all the energy that you would a big crunchy Euro, an inventive roleplaying game, or a deeply tactical wargame – you're going to be a bit disappointed. In those cases you'd be asking yourself whether you're actually just doing an 'enrichment activity' similar to those they give to primates in a zoo (we could argue if all board games are this actually... but we won't).

Instead, understand this is a game for a table that has people who have never played a hobby game before. This sits on the edge of modern family games and those classic one. We might see this happily sat on top of a copy of *Trionimos* (it's dominoes, but triangular) and next to Monopoly (which will only come out at Christmas).

But this is a better game than both of those, with much more



interesting brain-muscles in play. The challenge come from that idea of seeing the object in 3D and being able to understand how it all fits together.

The wrinkle in this system is that there's also a chance that some of the cards will conflict with one another. At this point you have to make a choice about which can be achieved most efficiently, after all if you can score two cards and offset the one you just can't do, then

you're in for a better score.

It's also easily tweakable. If you want to play with a much younger audience (which is does appeal

to because of its tactile and low-conflict nature) you can take the timer out of the game. We've played with a three and a half year old and found that she's happy to try the puzzles put in front of her, as long as there's no countdown. Equally, you can reduce or ramp up the number of challenge cards laid out in front of everyone. Taking it down can make for a very simple game, but ideal for those warming up to thinking about this game in 3D.

At the other end, dishing out extra cards can make the choices horribly complex. Is it better to lose two or even three cards this way, or would you be better off not completing the pyramid at all? Tough choices that can make the game even more juicy.

And in the end, this is a game for spending time with your family. We're not here to win prizes and trophies, we're just mucking about with a game together after dinner. This is where *Dimension* excels, offering you just enough game for when you just want to hang around with some people you like. 🎲



# ON THE CARDS

We take a looksee at some of the biggest trading card game news of the month and discover what's on the cards...

Words by **Ross 'The Wossy' Gilbert**



## THE POKÉMON TCG IS EVOLVING

This month The Pokémon Company international revealed the second *Scarlet & Violet TCG* expansion: *Paldea Evolved*. This will release on June 9<sup>th</sup> and include over 190 new cards including more than 15 new exs. Pokémon confirmed for the set including the Treasures of Ruin legendary quartet and Pikachu making its *Scarlet & Violet* debut as a powerful ex card. In competitive news it was finally announced that League Challenges and League Cups (the store-level events) would be returning in April after being suspended during the pandemic.

**Update:** Last month we mentioned that the Pokémon TCG World Championships didn't have dates. Now they do! They're happening in Yokohama, Japan between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of August.

## ONE RING TO RULE THEM ALL

Wizards of the Coast made a surprising but thematically-appropriate announcement this month with the reveal that their *Magic: The Gathering* The Lord of the Rings set (*Tales of Middle Earth*). The set will feature a copy of the "The One Ring" card released as a serial numbered 1 of 1 card. That's one copy in total of a card that can only be found in English Language Collector Boosters (as opposed to Set or Draft Boosters). One person will get the pull of a lifetime, for everyone else the card will still exist in 3 other versions including a Bundle Alt-Art Promo print included in every Bundle and Gift Bundle. Wizards also revealed the *March of the Machine* expansion, releasing on April 21<sup>st</sup>. We're told "You'll find familiar faces from across the Multiverse fighting with—and against—the Phyrexians" and it promises to be a set for both newer players and those looking to see the culmination of a war they've been following for a while.



## NEW YU-GI-OH SETS ANNOUNCED

We've previously heard about Yu-Gi-Oh's *Battles of Legend: Monstrous Revenge* expansion but this month we got a lot more details including that the set would feature more than 52 new cards and a bunch of old favourites. The set contains 40 Secret Rares, 62

Ultra Rares and more than 20 Quarter Century Secret Rares, meaning every pack will be full of awesome things. This month also saw the reveal of the *Summer Core Booster Set: Duelist Nexus*. This will be the first Core Set to feature Quarter Century Secret Rares, 25 in total (It IS the game's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary after all!). The set will be released on July 28<sup>th</sup>.

## BATTLE SPIRITS IS BACK!

*Battle Spirits Saga*, a new TCG from Bandai sprang to life this month with Launch events around the World, including in London where the winner walked away with \$15,000. Although a new game, *Battle Spirits Saga* is adapted from the popular Japanese *Battle Spirits* game which first launched in September 2008. The full release of the game will see the first Booster Box Set (Dawn of History) launching alongside 4 starter decks on April 28<sup>th</sup>. It's worth noting that although Dawn of History does not feature any collaborations with other Bandai properties, we've already had confirmation of an incoming Gundam crossover which could spell interesting things down the line.



## BAN HAMMER HITS THE ONE PIECE TCG

*The One Piece TCG* saw its first banned cards this month with the banning of Moby Dick and Cabaji. Although not an issue with the most recent English set (OP-02, Paramount War) these led to the Edward Newgate and Nami Decks becoming too powerful with the upcoming OP-03 expansion, which has already released in Japan. The bans will come into effect when the OP-03 Pre-Releases take place.

## MY HERO ACADEMIA GETS ADORABLE

Jasco Games has announced the release of the *My Hero Academia Collectible Card Game Deck Loadable Content Series 4: Chibi Mania*, due for release on April 7<sup>th</sup>. These feature fan favourite cards with new abilities and an awesome chibi look which I, personally, cannot get enough of!





The logo consists of the text "5E" in white, bold, sans-serif font, centered within a red circle.

5E

The background of the entire page is a detailed illustration. It depicts Gandalf the White, an elderly wizard with a long white beard and a tall, pointed hat, riding a white horse. He is gesturing with his hands as if casting a spell. They are in a lush, green forest with tall, thin trees. In the background, a large, ornate stone archway is visible. A small owl is flying in the air to the left of Gandalf. The overall atmosphere is magical and epic.

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**FREE LEAGUE**



# The Soloist

## GOING ON AN ADVENTURE

You don't even need to open your front door

Words by **Chris Lowry**

**M**odern life can feel like a bit of a rut; a dirty path flooded with the daily repetition of some decidedly non-glamorous tasks. A mundane reality of electricity bills, doing the

washing up and getting the groceries in.

Board games provide an easy and impermanent route to that escapism. Even at a basic level, games like *Power Grid*, *Who Is Going To Do The Dishes?* and *Pop to the Shops* can abstract the tediousness and responsibility

of those grown-up challenges. More than that though, deep down? Everyone wants to go on an adventure.

The reason Netflix binging is so entrancing is that ability to submerge yourself in another world – for hours on end, if you desire.

### THREE GAMES THAT WILL TAKE YOU ON AN ADVENTURE

#### SUB TERRA

*Sub Terra* is a game about professional cavers who have accidentally fallen down a deep shaft together. Your group of explorers absolutely must split up if they are going to find the exit in time, but that also leaves each one helpless, in the dark and completely alone. In my experience it's a challenge for anyone to escape and even rarer for all of them to make it out alive. Either way, the story you tell is always compelling, if a little bleak.

Mechanically similar to many other dungeon crawlers, *Sub Terra* stands out in two ways. Firstly, the intentional crossing of the "never split the party" rule quadruples the amount of exploration you get to do, and turning over tiles is fun. Second, most deep dungeon games involve soldiers on a hunt, not civilians with skills better suited to abseiling than assault. If the horror catches your characters, there is little they can do, which adds to the dramatic nature of fleeing.



#### PARKS

Keymaster games' delightful homage to the US National Parks Service is probably the prettiest game in anyone's collection. Using the mesmerizing artwork from the 59 Parks print series, it weaves a tale of hikers going on a journey.

Whilst fundamentally a fairly simple set collection game, there is something rather more-ish about *Parks*. I find the solo mode calm and clear. Although there is a sort-of-AI opponent in the Rangers, they don't provide competition to the degree that other games do, and are more like companions on your trail trip.

Scoring at the end isn't adversarial, you get a score that you can compare to previous plays if you wish, but don't really have to. I may have made this all sound very wishy-washy and unsatisfying; it's not. You might as well



However TV, and even books, will always fail to be truly immersive as you are always a spectator. Games offer something different - they offer *you*. In the words of Marcel Proust, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes." Sometimes the best way to journey isn't to be in new places, but instead about embracing some bits of cardboard with a wholehearted fling of imagination.

Now, there absolutely is an 'adventure' to be found in the tussle of head-to-head strategy games; I've spent many a bewitching hour playing Go, for example, but here in The Soloist I'm talking about games that sizzle with thematic seasoning.

Solo games are particularly well suited to saturation with story, as you can take them at a pace that works for your creative energies. I've even journaled some games, writing the story as it unfolds in my head.

Two games that do this well are *Friday* and *The Grizzled: At Your Orders*. From one viewpoint, they are two punishingly hard card games with interesting but straightforward

mechanics. With different eyes? *Friday* tells the story of your stranding on a remote island, and your piecemeal struggle to tame the challenges you meet, turning them into the tools that help you see victory; whilst *The Grizzled* is a fiercely flavourful reflection on the horrors of the war to end all wars.

Adventures also let us experience things that we absolutely wouldn't normally. *Space Hulk: Death Angel* lets me live the last moments of a squad of superhuman soldiers as they are torn apart by spindly, keratinous aliens. It's always brutal and rarely successful, and brings to mind CS Lewis; "When once a man is launched on such an adventure as this, he must bid farewell to hopes and fears, otherwise death or deliverance will both come too late to save his honour and his reason." Sadly, an honourable death is usually all I'm able to provide my squad of luckless Space Marines.

There's no reason that your adventure needs to be doom and gloom. *Everdell* provides a beautiful solo puzzle whilst twirling through the changing seasons of

an anthropomorphic forest, and *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* lets you roam the cartography and newsprint of Victorian London with zero risk to your personal safety.

Most importantly to solo adventuring is the luxury of time. There's a reason many solo variants are so difficult; because you don't have to apologise to other players when you break it down and set up for another go. Weighty, story-filled games like *Gloomhaven* and *7th Continent* allow you to sink steadily and unstoppably into the world they build around you, with no fear of 'wasting' someone else's time. John Mayer sings truth; "Don't be scared to walk alone. Don't be scared to like it." 🍷

say "What is the point of walking up a mountain?". It's a fun game, but it's also one that absolutely understands the peace, pace and attitude of a rambling through reassuringly enduring landscapes.



### XIA: LEGENDS OF A DRIFT SYSTEM

Possibly the most compelling part of adventure is the potential that anything can happen. That's the aspect that pulls you out of your comfortable, familiar world and into somewhere new and moving. Nothing does anything-can-happen better than a sandbox universe, an in-game setting without linear paths, without set board shapes or narrative game arcs.

*Xia* puts you in a tiny, tactile spaceship, on a hex on the edge of the observable galaxy. It's left to you to decide where to go next. Visit a planet? Hijack a smuggler? Run goods from place-to-place? Try your hand at lucrative (and potentially deadly) ore mining? Turn pirate? The game helps you achieve all these things without ever dictating which path you tread. I mean, to some extent anyway; if you start blowing up ships and taking their cargo, you won't be welcome on the lawful planets, and you'll get hunted down by the Enforcer - but coming a cropper with crime is one of the perils of operating in a civilized universe.

The option to upgrade your ships, slowly going from titchy starting craft to monster ships able to fit in every possible gadget brings in a constant tangible reminder of your progress. *Xia's Embers of a Dying Star* expansion also features an especially well-written solo story mode. There are enough escapades here to keep you entertained until the real world summons you home.





# ACHROMA

THE EVOLVING CARD GAME



[www.achroma.cards](http://www.achroma.cards)





my favourite game

# ALFRED VALLEY

The creator of weird solo experiences like *Lay on Hands* and *Thousand Empty Light* tells us why Peer Sylvester's classic *King of Siam* still holds a place in his heart

Time does not tend to be kind to board games. The emphasis on the newness — new games, new gimmicks, new gewgaws — makes efforts from the recent past look old before their time. Peer Sylvester's 2007 game *König von Siam* harkens back to an era when a game's sense of adornment originated from its design considerations, not its fancy clothing.

Yes, the game cuts a drab image: a map of Siam bathing in muted colours with no apparent concern for clashing with the bright primary colours of the cubes that fill it. But its lack of pretension is in keeping with an elegantly minimal game that is both entrancing and edifying.

Spanning eight rounds, *König von Siam* (or *King of Siam*) sees three historic factions battling for supremacy of Siam, nowadays Thailand. Crucially the players don't take on the exclusive role of each of these factions. Rather, they're free agents, pushing and pulling here and there to influence the play of power across the map's eight regions while wrestling with the prospect of a fourth faction, the British, coming in to mop up if there's ever a deadlock. And all this is controlled by the play of action cards. Many may be more familiar with the game as *The King Is Dead*, a more recent reimplement of the core mechanics.

One of the main tensions of the game is so simple yet tantalising. You win by having the most influence (i.e. cubes in your personal stash) of the faction that most dominates the board over several power struggles (i.e. rounds). The catch? You gain those cubes by removing them from the board, literally weakening the chances of the faction you're gunning for.

It sounds counterintuitive but much of the game's quirks lie in its feeling of opacity. You will play a first game and not have a clue what you're doing. A normal area control game might have the common decency to limit you to playing just one of your precious action cards a round. *König von Siam* lets you play as many as you bloody well please and leaves you to deal with the consequences. Sometimes you will spend five minutes assessing your position only to conclude that passing is the best option. You will feel clever. You will play the game again and again and find that, actually, you are not clever but that maybe you could be, that a sublime level of understanding could be attained with patience. Does it ever come? I don't know. But it gets into your head.

*König von Siam* has charmed its way into my life, its objective merits muddled with personal vignettes. There's the fond memory of waiting in my local pub to hand over seven whole pounds to the guy who needed to clear out his board game collection. The resonating hush in the kitchen of my old place after my friend and I played our very first game of it, pondering what the hell we'd just played and feeling like we'd just entered a pact. All the times I've raided the box to use the colourful cubes for playtesting something whack.

I love the idea of it as an ur-COIN game, those daunting, sprawling, card-driven counter insurgency simulations. Play a card (or not) and nudge the control of cube units across the board. Except *König's* rulebook is all of four pages of A5 and the game's done in 30 minutes.

It is by no means a perfect game, and yet it is perfect within its own bounds, if that makes any sense. It is complete and an enigma. 🍀



“*König von Siam* has charmed its way into my life, its objective merits muddled with personal vignettes”



# A GAME AS BIG AS YOU CAN IMAGINE

After delivering to the world one of the largest boxes of adventure, twice, Isaac Childres wants to go further – bringing Gloomhaven out of its board game box and into your imagination with the Gloomhaven roleplaying game

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

**T**he first time I spoke to Isaac Childres, the creator of one of gaming's (almost literal) monoliths, my daughter was ten days old. I had little sleep and was frankly, a bit nuts. I've listened back to our conversation about the recently revealed *Frosthaven* and laughed, it's very clear that someone who knows what they are doing is kindly and deftly leading me through the interview. A year or so later, when, mid-pandemic and mid-lockdown, we were arranging a playthrough of *Frosthaven* on Tabletop Simulator to show off some new monsters for our virtual show

(remember that? Virtual events?). I still call that mad collection of videos that we put live throughout that weekend (manually, by the way) 'Tabletop Gaming Not Live' in my head. During this call, Isaac was deep within the development of *Frosthaven* to a point of exhaustion. As a treat, the team had even put out a *Gloomhaven* puzzle. Still, Isaac very much ran that game of *Frosthaven* that we played virtually (because I am rubbish at it).

Which brings us to the inevitable, what do you do with all of this generous intention? You turn your game into a roleplaying experience, of course. It's natural that someone with

the capacity for making games that are this well-loved wants to hand over the experience to you, the player. The game master in any roleplaying game is either – depending on your experiences – the person with the best role in the entire game, or someone who has to do a lot of 'work' so other people can have fun. Generally, I think that those who play big and complicated games with books designed to stop artillery fire are likely to be in the 'work' camp more often – but then, for some, that work is part of the fun they're having. And you might expect a *Gloomhaven* roleplaying game to be on the heavier side of things, ➤

## MASTERS OF THE GLOOMIVERSE

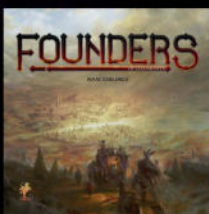
*With the world of 'haven expanding, we thought it would be a good idea to dedicate a little space to everything you should be looking out for in the series.*



### GLOOMHAVEN

Where it all started. This Kickstarter mega-hit changed not only what people expected from a modern adventure game (i.e. more) it also changed the way people thought about crowdfunding. In *Gloomhaven* players take the role of various fantasy characters and explore a world of dungeons, danger, and most importantly, big choices. While the game is famous for being huge and often something players don't finish in a meaningful way, its biggest asset is the introduction of Eurogame style combat. Crunchy choices about using cards for one of the two actions available, and because the cards in hand are your health in combat, you'll be planning your attacks carefully for fear of running out of puff. Inspired.





## FOUNDERS OF GLOOMHAVEN

A bit of an offshoot, but sometimes even the

designer of the world's heaviest game (probably, let's not look it up) just want to do some fun Eurogame stuff. In *Founders* player take the roles of various fantasy peoples building the city of *Gloomhaven*. Play cards to build building and get better resources to build better buildings and get more prestige. The wrinkle in this game is that each player's race can only import certain types and amounts of various resources, meaning you'll have to work together to make this great city. Throw in a bit of auctioning and voting and you've got a pretty good 'argument amongst the guilds' theming. Not necessary for diving into the world of *Gloomhaven*, but certainly a nice bonus.



# GLOOMHAVEN: THE ROLEPLAYING GAME



but for those familiar with the workings of the board game you're going to find yourself sliding into the role very quickly. In many ways, according to Childres, you're going to be playing the game that he wanted to make as a roleplaying game – that ended up being a board game. If *Gloomhaven* is the poster child for a 'roleplaying game in a box' then the RPG is going to be the final form of that roleplaying experience. It's a clever idea – make one of the largest games out there and then ask, what if it could go on forever?

Plus, there's the miniatures. The crowdfunding campaign that's going to be landing later in the year is going to also include

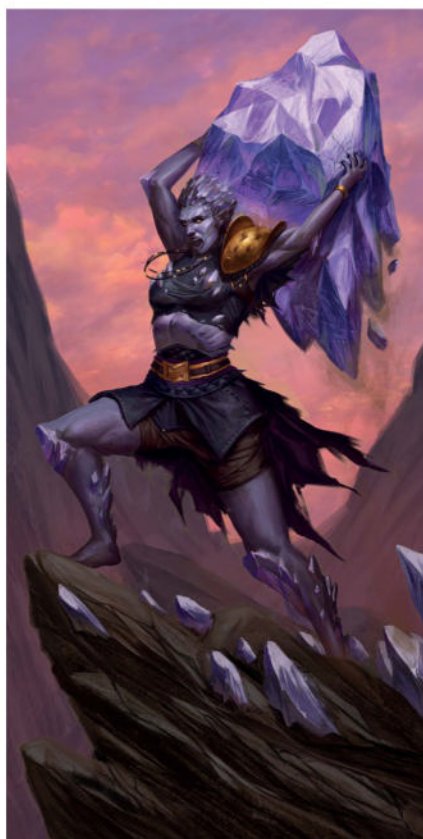
miniatures which can be used in either the roleplaying game or the board games.

We sat down with Isaac to chat about the new roleplaying game (and getting over *Frosthaven*).

## Hello Isaac! Do you mind re-introducing yourself?

I am Isaac Childres, owner of Cephalofair Games, and designer of *Gloomhaven*, *Frosthaven*, and other stuff.

How does it feel having 'finished' *Frosthaven*? You very much seemed to be suffering from 'too much *Frosthaven*' in your brain last time we spoke!



Definitely less *Frosthaven* on the brain, which is nice, but it never seems to be over. I still have to work with localization partners on their questions, answer player questions for the official FAQ, among other things. But, yeah, I've been spending a lot of time this last year with my son, who's 10 months old now. Not quite taking a break, as there's a lot of work to do on the RPG and other things, but it's definitely less intense than *Frosthaven* development, which is good.

## Are you happy with how it all went and is being received?

Yes, absolutely. I think it is achieving exactly what we wanted to achieve – giving players an enhanced *Gloomhaven* experience with more refined content and additional systems to engage with. Reception has been great so far, and I love reading about people's experiences with it. There's just so much cool stuff in there that I'm happy people finally get to interact with.

## So, tell us about this *Gloomhaven* RPG – what is it?

Well, it's an RPG set in the *Gloomhaven* world, where a GM (Gloom Master, of course) can guide players through their own adventures, using the *Gloomhaven* combat system and also a robust role playing system for all the out-of-combat stuff.

## Why does the world need a *Gloomhaven* RPG?

Well, part of it is that *Gloomhaven* was created in response to RPGs that have, in my opinion, lackluster combat systems heavily reliant on randomness. I just never found that very exciting, so I developed my own system. Of course, I released it as a board game, but I've always wanted to have it be a part of an actual role-playing system, too. I also find the world of *Gloomhaven* to be a very interesting place, full of unique classes and ancestries, and I want to give fans of the board game the freedom to explore the world and do whatever they want in it.



## GLOOMHAVEN: JAWS OF THE LION

The game that was announced as 'Untitled' because the team weren't quite sure whether they'd be able keep the name for the retail release, and is, to some, the '*haven*' game that's going to get played the most and for the longest. This solves a lot of the set-up headaches for the bigger games, as all of the adventures appear within a single book, which also includes the additional rules for that encounter. This stripped-down version of the game makes for the tutorial version for some, and a perfectly reasonable and complete '*haven*' experience for everyone else. If you're not sure you want in yet, pick up this prequel.





And how does it work mechanically? Will people recognise that Classic Gloomhaven Flavour™?

Yes, of course. Combat is largely the same, with some tweaks to make it more thematic (no more having to pick up all the coins before the combat ends!) and account for the fact that players will probably be engaging in smaller single-room combats rather than big, board game-sized combats. And then out of combat, uncertainty is resolved through attribute checks, where the classic modifier deck is still being used to provide some randomness. Out of combat, of course, is much less structured than in combat, but your character will still



feel the same, with a list of skills inspired by their combat abilities, but useful in a more broad set of circumstances.

Tell us about the compatibility with the other 'haven systems?

The RPG sourcebook we're working on is focused more on *Gloomhaven* and porting the classes and ancestries from that game to the RPG space. Given that, players will still need new sets of cards to play the RPG, due to the afore-mentioned tweaks. Players can, however, use the *Gloomhaven* box as a sort of toolkit, providing them with plenty of map and overlay tiles, item cards, monsters, and other bits to enhance their RPG sessions.

How are players able to inject themselves into these character and archetypes now?

Character creation is an interesting process full of meaningful decisions. First, players will get to pick whichever class and ancestry

combination they would like, which influences many things, but most prominently what skills and ability cards they have access to. There's some attribute point allocation to further customize your character, and then players are encouraged to really dig deep into their character's backstory through a selection of backgrounds, which also provide bonuses for some attribute checks.

What sort of TTRPG player is this for? Would those totally new to TTRPGs be comfortable here, veterans, or is this one for the fans?

Ultimately, we're trying to hit the middle ground between *Gloomhaven* the board game and the RPG space. We're hoping that this will appeal to *Gloomhaven* veterans who are interested in getting into RPGs, and RPG veterans who are interested in trying out *Gloomhaven*. I think if you are familiar with at least one of those two, you shouldn't have any problem settling in here. ➤



## FROSTHAVEN

The bigger, colder, sequel to *Gloomhaven*. Using many of the same systems, but with a theme of not travelling the world and questing about as much as building a place for everyone to thrive in a place where really, they shouldn't be able to. Set at the end of the world a small outpost is set upon by mysterious peoples and powers. Can you, and your friends, not only defeat the enemies of this little uncompromising slice of civilisation, but maybe even make allies of them? Once you start building up your settlement (using a similar sticker system to *Gloomhaven*) you'll soon find yourself at the helm of a growing town. Plan to survive the next cold snap, or push on with your own goals – the choice is of course, yours.



# GLOOMHAVEN: THE ROLEPLAYING GAME

Is there a timeline for us to worry about?  
Does it slot into the worlds of the board  
games?

There will be a timeline and history provided in the sourcebook, up to and including the events of *Gloomhaven* (and *Forgotten Circles*), but, as with any RPG, players should feel free to set their campaign anywhere within that timeline they would like. And lore will be provided for the entire world, though we'll go into the most detail with the *Gloomhaven* region, which is where we expect the majority of players will be interested in playing.

I think everyone admires Gloomhaven for how well put together everything is, it's a very controlled world, how do you feel about handing this world over to your players?

It certainly has been a challenge turning a very controlled system into a more open experience that players can mold to their liking! Right now I'm feeling pretty good about it, though. Ever since *Gloomhaven* came out, I've been encouraging fans to tell their own stories with the system. The creative community around this game is amazing, and I think they'll tell a lot of great stories with the RPG.

There's a load of minis as part of the crowd funding, what surprises await there?

Haha, not sure there are any surprises necessarily. It's pretty straightforward, really - we're making miniatures for all monsters, bosses, and summons across all *Gloomhaven* and *Frosthaven* games. It's over 500 miniatures, so the only surprise might come when all the giant boxes arrive at backers' houses.

What's next for you and the company more generally?

We're just gearing up for this crowdfunding project later this year! It'll include the RPG, the miniatures, the second printing of *Frosthaven*, and lots of other super-secret stuff that should be very exciting to fans - things they've been asking for, and things they didn't know they needed...yet. But that project will definitely be keeping us busy for a while. Beyond that, I have plenty of ideas on where to go next, but I haven't yet decided what to focus on. 🎲



## GLOOMHAVEN: THE ROLEPLAYING GAME

What we're reading about right here. Your chance to take the world of *Gloomhaven* and make it your own. Become the class-background combination that you desire and strike out in your own direction. The rich world of *Gloomhaven* is now open to you.



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# STAR WARS: THE DECK BUILDING GAME

# ROGUE ONE

In the corner a galaxy far, far away the Empire is building something powerful... it's a deck of cards in this latest outing for the Death Star

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

**S**tar Wars games come in a couple of flavours. And I'm not just talking about the two sides of The Force. There's the obvious reskinned cash-ins (not knocking these at all, some are collector's items) and then there's the bigger crunchier experiences of games like *Imperial Assault* and *Rebellion*. For some of us we just want a quick trip to a galaxy far, far away, without the need for specialist measuring stick or stretch of hours equal to the pre-scroll lore of the prequels.

Enter, *Star Wars: The Deck Building Game*. Created by the mind behind the titanic *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game* and *Marvel Champions*, promises to be a great way to spend some time amongst the stars. While the other two games from Caleb Grace (where he was lead developer) are now thought of as massive, expansive worlds with an endless combination of heroic characters to take control of, enemies to beat, and quests to go on, here, we've got a smaller boxed game that offers the sense of depth of those previous titles, but without the endless sea of character to play. After all, how big can a galaxy really be?

Instead, we have a compact deckbuilder which adds a few twists to a genre probably best popularised by *Dominion*. It is *Star Realms* that is probably the most apt comparison. Like this small box classic of buying stuff (in space) to destroy your opponent (in space), *Star Wars: The Deck Building Game* offers players a market of cards between their bases (or life totals). But unlike *Star Realms* those cards are divided into Rebel and Empire sides of the conflict – meaning that you can't pick up a Rebel card as The Empire and vice versa.

You can however, destroy your opponent's cards in the market. This delicious twist is at the heart of what makes this little deckbuilder tick.

We sat down with Caleb Grace to discuss how he took everyone's favourite never-ending franchise, and turned it into a great gateway game for the whole family, whichever side of the force they're on.

**Hello! Can you introduce yourself to our readers?**

Hi, my name is Caleb Grace and I am a senior game designer at Fantasy Flight Games. I've been with the studio for 11 years, and in that time I've served as lead developer on *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game* and *Marvel Champions: The Card Game*. Those are both cooperative games, so designing *Star Wars: The Deckbuilding Game* was an exciting opportunity for me to work on a competitive game. This is the first game that I have pitched and designed on my own. As a long-time Star Wars fan, it is an incredible privilege to share this passion project with so many people around the world.

**What is *Star Wars: The Deck Building Game*?**

*Star Wars: The Deckbuilding Game* is a one on one competitive game where one player takes control of the Galactic Empire and the other player leads the Rebel Alliance. The game provides each player with a small deck of cards to begin with so it isn't necessary to build a deck or otherwise prepare anything before you play. Everything you need is included in the box.



**Can you describe the main gameplay loop? How does it all work?**

Each player begins the game with a deck of ten relatively weak cards, and they use those cards to strengthen their decks by purchasing more powerful cards from the Galaxy row situated between the players. The Galaxy row is constantly refilled by cards from the Galaxy deck, which

is comprised of iconic characters, vehicles, and spaceships from the movies. When a player purchases a card, they place it in their discard pile. When they eventually run out of cards, they shuffle their discard pile back into their deck, giving them access to the stronger cards they have purchased.

The goal of the game is to destroy your opponent base, so while you use the resource value on your cards to purchase more cards, you will use the attack value on your cards to deal damage to the enemy base. Damage placed on a base persists from turn to turn, and when a base has damage equal to its hit point value it is destroyed. The first player to destroy 3 of their opponent's wins the game!

**Tell us about making this game feel like *Star Wars*?**

My hope is that the game feels like *Star Wars* on two levels: macro and micro. At the macro level, I think the game immerses players in the conflict between the Empire and the Rebellion by pitting the them against each other in a race to destroy each other's bases. This was very much inspired by the final act of the original *Star Wars* movie where the Rebels launch a desperate attack to blow up the Death Star before it can destroy Yavin IV.

On the micro level, I tried to give each card an ability that resonates with its role in the films. For example, the Death Star base gives the Empire player the power to destroy capital ship cards by using its super laser ability, and





“ I tried to give each card an ability that resonates with its role in the films ”



# STAR WARS: THE DECK BUILDING GAME

the Hammerhead Corvette capital ship card can be exiled by the Rebel player to destroy an enemy capital ship card, inspired by what they did in *Rogue One*. This allows players to recreate their favorite movie moments in the game or imagine new stories as the game unfolds.

It's really great to see a slightly lighter Star Wars game, was accessibility a key point of the design process?

Yes, it was. I love deep strategy games, but as I have grown older and busier it's become increasingly harder to find time to play them. As a result, I wanted to design something that scratched the strategy game itch but was much faster to setup and easier to teach my friends. I feel really good about how my deckbuilding game does that, and I hope others enjoy that aspect as well.

The game is being praised for its 'easy to learn, hard to master' aspect – where do you think the depth comes from here? How do you design for that?

It's very rewarding to hear this feedback because that was another one of my top goals when designing the game. I wanted it to have as much replay value as possible, so I designed a 90-card galaxy deck with 55 different cards in it. This all but guarantees that each game will unfold differently, and I think a lot of the 'hard to master' feedback comes from discovering new possibilities and card combinations in each game. I've been playing the game weekly with friends for over two years and I'm still being surprised by different situations.

Love the 'attack the market' mechanic specifically as it gives the whole game a little bit of 'take that' spice. What's the mechanic you're most proud of in the game?

The bounty hunting/sabotage is my favorite mechanic as well. It was important to me to keep the Rebel and Empire factions separate, which meant the Rebel player could not purchase Empire cards and vice versa. But that obviously meant there would be times where one player or the other would not be able to purchase anything in the Galaxy row, so I needed a solution to that. The idea of attacking your opponent's cards in the Galaxy row felt like a very thematic solution to me. It reminded me of when Boba Fett captured Han in *The Empire Strikes Back*, or when Chewbacca captured an AT-ST in *Return of the Jedi*. And by adding a reward to each unit with a target value, it makes for some interesting in-game decisions. Like, do I use my units attack

value to put 8 damage on the Rebel player's base, or do I use them to bounty hunt Luke Skywalker, gaining 4 resources and 4 Force as a result? I think making the right decisions in those moments is the key to victory.

How do you see this fitting into people's collections?

It's a fairly fast and light game, so I think it's great for when you want to play a strategy game but you don't have all afternoon. It can be perfect for lunch breaks at work or school,

or for a quick game at the end of the day when you just want to relax. One of the things that I am most proud of is how many people have told me they enjoy playing the game with their spouse or their kids. Quality time with family is an important value of mine, so it's wonderful that my game can help facilitate that for others.

Do you have any advice for new players?

I think the most important advice I can give is to embrace the high level of variance in the game – it's there by design. There will be







# THE BEST STAR WARS BOARD GAMES

*If this is your first Star Wars board game, here are your next steps*



## X-WING

Take control of the classic X-Wing and TIE fighters in a classic space-dogfight. Using maneuver dials and templates you'll send your craft flying around one another in an attempt to line up the perfect shot. The

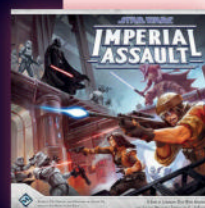
second edition adds 'stress' to the ships for particularly harsh actions. A classic worth adding to your collection.



## REBELLION

For those who want to experience the galactic hide and seek of the films, this is the game. With a scope that's designed to tell your own story it can feel both epic and very personal. Can The Empire snuff out the rebellion before

they get the galaxy on their side?



## IMPERIAL ASSAULT

So, you want miniatures? How about some AT-ATs? Of course you do. This is the best way to experience small-scale Star Wars with the most amount of pew-pew space-laser gun noises. Pick from any number of factions and have at it.

games where you can't purchase any cards in the starting row because they mostly belong to your opponent's faction. You may be frustrated by this at first, but I encourage you to see it as an opportunity to have a memorable gaming experience. I have played many games like this where it looked bleak at the beginning, but I was able to come back and win by making use of the bounty hunting/sabotage rules and carefully selecting the right base at the right time. These victories were sweeter to me because I had to work extra hard for them,

and I felt rewarded for my good decisions. It doesn't work every time, but that's okay too because it's good to see your friends win sometimes. Ultimately, the game plays fast enough that if a game doesn't go your way, you can just shuffle up and play again.

### What's your favourite Star Wars film?

I grew up watching the original Star Wars movie trilogy on VHS almost every week. I loved them so much that I memorized almost all the dialogue, so it's hard for me to pick a

favorite out of those three. As a result, I will say that my current favorite is Rogue One, because going to see that movie in the theater gave me the same feelings I had watching the original films as a kid. I loved how it expanded on the conflict between the Empire and the Rebellion and introduced so many incredible characters. Watching the last act of Rogue One on the big screen was one of the most memorable movie-going experiences I have ever had. It was constantly in my mind as I was developing the deckbuilding game. 🌟



# THE GATEWAY KING OF TOKYO



Welcome to the world of hobby gaming. We're back with a bombastic family game of massive monsters, chunky dice and a chance to declare yourself the King of Tokyo

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

**M**onsters are tearing apart Tokyo! But not to worry, because you're one of them!

You and a few friends will be battling it out to become the last monster standing in a big ol' wrestling match. Pick your favourite monster based entirely on their good looks and set yourself up for a bash at one another.

There's two zones on the board – one is Tokyo city itself, the other simply 'everywhere else'. This game is a 'king of the hill' competition, where you want to be in the city to gain extra points at the start of your turn. Winning is a matter of hitting 20 points total without getting wiped out (having your health reduced to zero from ten).

Playing the game is a simple matter of rolling some dice and applying them. The numbers offer you victory points if you collect a set of three of the same number, the hearts restore a health point, the energy is money that can be used to buy power cards, and most importantly, the claw means you attack everyone not in your zone. You'll have three "re-rolls" to make here, which means you get to choose which dice you keep while rolling the other ones again.

More importantly though, you'll be moving into Tokyo in the hope of gaining more points – and once you're there you'll be able to do damage to everyone outside. *King of Tokyo* has pro-wrestling feel to it – each turn there's someone in the hotseat who more or less plays the 'bad guy' (because they're winning) while everyone else tries to topple them and stop them getting points. Drama arrives as that villain flees and someone else takes their place – and now suddenly your friend is now your enemy! Plus, once you start buying power cards (to keep or discard when used) you'll soon become powerful enough to think that, yes, you can take them all on. It's time then, to choose your monster...

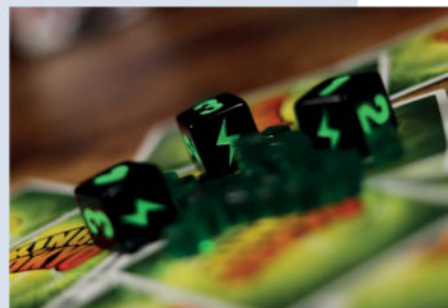
**A ROYAL RUMBLE  
OF MEGA  
MONSTERS**

**CAN YOU SPOT  
ALL THE MOVIE  
MONSTER  
REFERENCES?**

**SATISFYING,  
CHUNKY DICE**

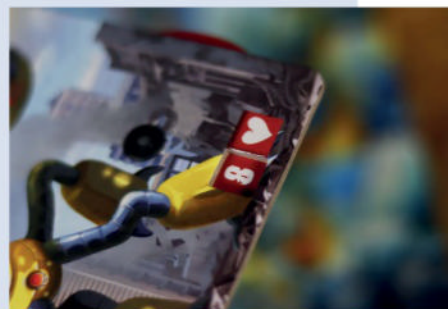
## 1 ROLL THE DICE, THRICE

Roll the handful of dice you've been given. Each side will have a symbol or a number on it. Roll a claw, and that's worth one attack point. Roll a heart, and you can heal for each. Roll an energy and you can use that to buy cards. Roll a number – and if you get three of the same number – get that many points. After your first roll you can decide to keep some dice and re-roll others. After your second roll you can do the same again. You don't have to reroll if you have what you need. Once you're happy with the results you apply them.



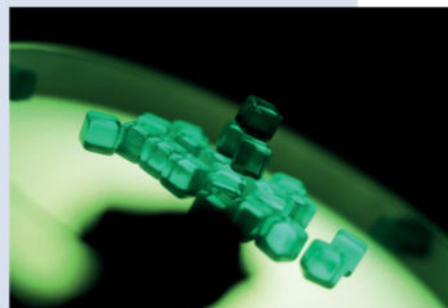
## 2 ATTACK, HEAL, RETREAT

You now get to resolve your dice in the order that you see fit. Take your points, heal up (if you're not in Tokyo) by changing the dials on your personal monster board. Attack the monster in Tokyo if you're on the outside, or everyone else if you're the current big monster around town. Those who got hit will take their damage on their health dial. The monster in Tokyo, after they take damage, can decide to retreat. It's often wise to do this before things get too rough! If you rolled energy, you should take these cubes now for when you want to go shopping.



## 3 TO TAKE THE CITY, OR GO SHOPPING?

If the city is empty, you must take it and become the current King of Tokyo. And then there's shopping: take a look at the shop and see if there's any bonus cards you can buy (the cost is in the top left of the card) – these might give you points, powers, or one-off benefits. Spend your energy to get them, or spend two to refresh the shop. After this there's a 'end of turn' phase that applies to some power cards. Once all that's done, if relevant, you'll pass your dice to the next monster.







## WINNING

Winning is a case of getting to 20 victory points, and not getting knocked out before then. When you get reduced to zero health you lose all of your energy and cards you've acquired in the game. Try to avoid this!

## STRATEGY

**It's In The Dice, But Not The Roll:** While *King of Tokyo* is a game about rolling dice, so there is some luck involved in getting the results you want, your choices about when to stick on certain dice is more important. There can be a desire to just start whacking away at the opponent's health every turn – and while that's important to clear them out of Tokyo city itself, you may be better off improving your position.

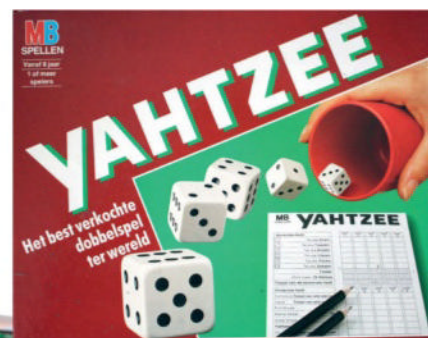
**Balancing Your Boldness:** Moving in to the city is the most aggressive play you can go for, but is it the right time? Equally, there's a benefit to retreating from the city at the right time. If there's a weaker player outside the city who would take your place if you retreated, then putting them in the hotseat for the next round can be a great tactic. If you've build up cards that can help you do massive damage to everyone from Tokyo, then moving in is a no brainer. Remember the order of play and keep an eye on the strength of other players.

**A Monster Shopping Spree:** A key part of *King of Tokyo* is getting hold of new power cards, which can be extremely powerful given the right circumstances. For example the Poison Spit card gives everyone a token that does

an extra damage done to them each turn. Or the Jets card which lets you retreat from Tokyo without taking damage. Getting these powerful cards can give you a strategy for winning the game, if you lean into them.

### Try It If You Like...

**Yahtzee:** The dice rolling classic is updated with a bit more excitement and quite a few more monsters. 🎲



### TRY IT IF YOU LIKE...

Yahtzee: The dice rolling classic is updated with a bit more excitement and quite a few more monsters.





# TOKAIDO DUO

Sometimes bigger is better

Designer: Antoine Bauza | Publisher: Funforge



With *Tokaido*, Antoine Bauza managed to create a game that embodies a feeling of a relaxing walk on the picturesque 'East sea road' of Japan, while still maintaining the core of a competitive game. However, who would even remember to worry about victory points while busy soaking in hot springs, or painting dreamy panoramas, or busy buying souvenirs at the local stores? *Tokaido Duo*, the two-player instalment of the game, feels a little more confrontational, although enjoying a journey across Japan's equally beautiful island Shikoku is still the key attraction.

Each player controls pawns representing an artist, a merchant and a pilgrim travelling different segments of the board and performing tasks representative of their evocation. The artist, unsurprisingly, creates paintings that can then be gifted during later journeys. The merchant gathers wares from different mountain towns and deliver them



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game board
- ▶ 6 Player boards
- ▶ 26 Ware tokens
- ▶ 24 Coin tokens
- ▶ 20 Painting tokens
- ▶ 12 Gold slabs
- ▶ 8 Boutique tokens
- ▶ 6 Wood meeples
- ▶ 4 Wood pegs
- ▶ 3 Custom dice
- ▶ 3 Wave tokens
- ▶ Hot spring token
- ▶ Fabric bag



to be sold to the coastal towns. The pilgrim visits the temples, hot springs and gardens. Each activity is tracked on their respective boards, rewarding players with points based on how much they have achieved. Unlike, *Tokaido*, where moving is based on the track movement mechanic, where the last player always moves, in *Tokaido Duo*, players roll dice, each of which corresponds to the specific role, and then alternate in picking the result they want and moving the pawn the number of spaces on their chosen dice.

The dice selection adds a competitive edge to the game. In *Tokaido*, players could move as far or as little as they wanted, although some of the more highly sought-after spots could be already occupied by other players, limiting the options.

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TOKAIDO

If you don't mind less chilling in the hot spring and more hopping around the collecting and selling wares, then you will definitely enjoy your stay at the Shikoku island!

However, in *Duo* having to choose between three or fewer randomly generated dice adds an extra layer of restriction, but it can also create interesting gameplay decisions. For example, you may want to move an artist but based on the current position of the merchant, using their dice would have a better victory point payoff. However, what if your opponent chose the pilgrim dice for the last couple of rounds, speeding to pick up points on the pilgrim's track, while you have barely made a progress on yours? You may feel like you need to catch up and take the pilgrim's dice the next opportunity you get. Luckily, each role feels balanced, so someone doing better than you on one track doesn't indicate an immediate need to raise the white flag.

Xavier Gueniffey Durin returns to pen the artwork for the *Duo*, retaining the clean sharpness of the *Tokaido*'s aesthetic. However, some big colourful moves are missed. Gone, for example, are the panorama cards which when assembled show a sprawling beautiful landscape. The artists' paintings are small tiles with intricate line work, which whilst beautiful lack the striking visual impact.

As similar as *Tokaido* and *Duo* are in theme, aesthetic and the goals of the game (collect various sets of things), they also feel very different. The addition of dice drafting as the movement and action mechanic and having to control three characters, each completing a different set of mini-games, creates a more competitive and less leisurely gameplay. It is interesting and presents its own challenges to figure out, but it is also not what you probably expected when picking up a new *Tokaido* game. ●

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

## PLAY IT? MAYBE

*Tokaido Duo* isn't just a two-player *Tokaido*. While retaining some of the beloved features of the original, its dice drafting mechanic adds a different feel and a more competitive edge to the game.





# AZUL MINI

Designer: Michael Kiesling | Publisher: Next Move Game



**W**hen a game is great, you want to take it with you everywhere. So, it helps if it comes in a portable, compact size, and has components that can be used in situations where large flat table surfaces may not be readily available.

*Azul* is a great game. There is just something so incredibly compelling about its tile drafting puzzle that forms a colourful pattern of chunky Moorish decorative tiles at the end of the game. However, it is not easily played on the go with its large box and components that require a stable surface. *Azul Mini* edition rectifies those issues.

It is, as the name suggests, the same game in miniature, which can be packed in one clothed lockable bag and easily carried everywhere. The components not only have been downsized but also redesigned in such a way that a game can be played on the go. You won't be able to play this game while standing in a convention queue, but you could fit

it across a couple of pull-down tables on the train or on the plane. The player boards have been designed with grips, allowing tiles to stay in place as they loosely slot on top. While the tiles lack the satisfying chunkiness of *Azul*'s original pieces, with this design it is less likely to mess up the whole board by accidentally bumping it. The plates, from which players draft tiles in the first phase of the game, also have their own trays that keeps them in place. The Moorish tiles still pile on top of each plate (which are a little too small for four tiles), which feels as annoying oversight, especially considering how well the player boards have been designed.

The mini version is not going to replace the main game – the original wins on a table presence and the tactility of tiles. However, if you want to have your favourite game on the go as much as possible, *Azul Mini* offers a compelling option. ●

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA



PLAY IT? MAYBE

# ROTTEN TOMATOES: THE CARD GAME

Designer: N/A | Publisher: Cryptozoic



**R**otten Tomatoes, the original crowd-sourced movie review site (probably now eaten by Letterboxd) offers up a plethora of opinions on everyone's favourite and least favourite films. In the game you'll be dished out a bunch of film cards which you'll arrange in order of their tomato score. On your turn the player next to you will draw a card, read out the title, and you'll have to guess where the score fits in your rogues gallery of films and their ratings. Get it right, get the card. Get ten, win the game. That's it. It becomes a bit more fun when the wild cards come out and everyone has to guess the year or similar, but ultimately it's a bit of a half-cooked game with little spark within it.

In truth, chatting about movies is a good enough game in itself. Whether you're exploring forgotten favourites, the 'when I saw Terminator 2 in the cinema aged 11' story, or just pronouncing that something is completely and utterly rubbish despite the cast, the banter is the fun bit. That is more or less the review of this game. If you're happy to let half a game limp along under the true fun of telling somebody that yes, their taste in films is awful, then go for it. If you need a little more than a physical version of 'what do you reckon the score on that website is?' move on. ●

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

PLAY IT? MAYBE





## QAWALE

### Making fat stacks

**Designer:** Romain Froger & Didier Lenain-Bragard | **Publisher:** Gigamic



10m

2

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£30

**Q**awale is another game in the line of wooden abstracts from Gigamic. Along with games like *Pylos* and *Quoridor*, these games offer a halfway house between chess and home décor. See, they're very lovely to look at, they're always made of wood, and often in pleasingly natural shapes – especially with the pebbles here. Dropping one of these pebbles on top of another produces a very happy little noise that is, in part, the charm of these games. They're tactile, they're asking to be picked up. There's something naturally nice about a few bits of wood that you can move around. I've no idea what it does to people's brains but it's probably a bit like what TikTok does. They're good looking enough to leave on the coffee table like a little abstract gaming trap. The step from "oh hey, what's this? A game?" through to playing is a small one.

In *Qawale* players will take a pile of eight light or dark pebbles as their own. The board is set up with a pile of two neutral stones on each corner of the four by four grid. On your turn you'll place a stone and then move that stone, and everything it's on top



#### WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game board
- ▶ 8 Light coloured pebbles
- ▶ 8 Dark coloured pebbles
- ▶ 8 Tan coloured pebbles
- ▶ Bag

of, as many spaces orthogonally as there are stones. As your pebbles hop they drop off a pebble at each spot they land on. To win, players simply need to create a row of four of their colour, when looking from above. It's a very simple game that, because it's about these different movement patterns and a variety of routes that could be taken to anything, soon becomes a little puzzle to unpick.

Like the way that you quickly start seeing all the lanes of influences and attack in chess after playing for a little while, you'll start to see the different moves that could be taken here, based on the way the coloured stones are layered. You'll soon see that there's valuable moves that put you in a three-in-a-row position, that also cover your opponent's pieces. Beyond that, you'll start seeing that while you might be covering your opponent's piece, you're also giving them extra reach with those pebbles.

It's a game with surprising depth for its simplicity. And there's ways of becoming very good at *Qawale*, making it a rewarding experience to play repeatedly as you'll find everyone wants to try again straight away.

This is the newest game in the line from Gigamic, with all the other games mentioned here (and our feature on the series last year) all being published in the 1990s. It's a great sign that we might be heading towards an era of new abstract games that offer the hobby gamer something to get their teeth into.

So then, take this little box and little board and lay it around like a trap next time you've got someone round to just have a cup of coffee. It's one worth falling for. ●

**CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT**

#### PLAY IT? YES

The ideal quick abstract game that leaves you ready for the rematch.

#### TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED CHESS...

We've all enjoyed this classic game enough to know that there's a sense amongst non-gamers that it's difficult. *Qawale* will break down these barriers for new players. Who knows, you might even get them to play *Catan* next...





# ESCAPERUN ALCATRAZ

An escape not worth attempting.

Designer: Stephen Baker | Publisher: Gamestorm Oy



**A**lcatraz prison has undergone a refurbishment: it is now fully automated, with AI sentinels patrolling the grounds of the island night and day and swarms of drones seeking out any prisoners who are not where they are supposed to be. The new, escape-proof security systems is about to test it only get locked up on the prison island themselves. Oops! Naturally, they will need attempt to get out. To do this, they will need to navigate the corridors of the prison block to make it out, and then get inside other buildings on the island to find the necessary tools to escape, all while avoiding the roaming never-sleeping sentinels. Maybe they will get lucky and find

sending them to all corners of the island to find useful items – escape cards – that can assist during their attempt to run. After each character's turn, a sentinel card is flipped to reveal various ways in which the automated security system is getting tougher. This could mean, for example, that a new sentinel appears on the map, or that swarm of drones is out or another tile is placed on the security board symbolising the system coming online. When one row on the security boards gets filled with tiles, the system is fully activated, and the 'prisoners' have run out of time and are stuck in Alcatraz, possibly for the rest of their lives.

while dodging robot sentinels and drones!

The practicality of playing the game, unfortunately, doesn't live up to these expectations. The huge island is composed of a handful building locations which primarily do the same thing – offer escape cards or places to start a run. To reach them can take multiple turns and the rewards, a randomly drawn card, could easily be not worth the effort. Players control the placement and the movement of the sentinels (the cards only show how far to move them but not where). One competitive group could be sending sentinels after each other and causing total chaos. While a gaming group that decided to play cooperatively, could

send all the sentinels on the other side of the map so they don't bother them at all. As sentinels are the

ignition keys to the boat or helicopter, or maybe a secret passage to an underground tunnel?

That's what players will have to find out in *EscapeRUN Alcatraz*, a futuristic reimagining of American's famous penitentiary that in the year 2034. It is a part escape room and part skill challenge as players roll dice to find out if their characters pass the necessary tests to escape. That is, however, if they get to find the escape route and decide to attempt a run. Before that, however, there is a whole prison complex to explore.

Throughout the game, players will be typically controlling several characters at the same time and

As a concept *EscapeRUN Alcatraz* sounds so, well, cool! You have the tension between attempting an escape early, potentially with not enough resources, or waiting too long as the security system becomes harder and harder to avoid, and eventually running out of time. Players can work cooperatively, trying to escape together, or competitively by sending the sentinels to the location of other player characters. And, of course, you have the whole island to explore

game's main opposition, this takes out any challenges or tension. All players then must do is spend a bunch of turns collecting some cards, arrive at one of the run locations and hope they have enough cards or can roll well to beat the skill challenges and escape. It is good that the game gives players a choice of how they want to play, but it doesn't adjust its gameplay to reflect those choices. Making for either a chaotic free-for-all or dull dredge through prison grounds. 🐼

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

## PLAY IT? NO

*EscapeRUN Alcatraz* has all the right ideas, however, the execution does not live up to the vision.



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

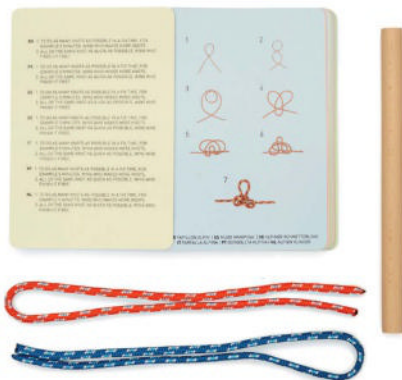
- ▶ Game board
- ▶ System board
- ▶ 165 Cards
- ▶ 18 Wooden tokens
- ▶ 2 Dice
- ▶ 18 Run tiles
- ▶ 12 Building tiles
- ▶ 18 Sentinel tiles
- ▶ Escape/run token
- ▶ 12 Movement markers

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED BREAK IN: ALCATRAZ

The island prison carries a certain mystique, so, unsurprisingly, it served as a theme for several board games, including *Break in: Alcatraz*, another escape room-like experience, which has a more puzzle-based focus.







# KNOT GAME

Don't get it twisted

Designer: RNLI | Publisher: Kikkerland



Much has been written arguing that the average player is interested not in tight design but in an *experience*. They don't want to waste time learning lots of rules, they don't want to spend much money, they don't want to devote much space to storage, they just want a diverting pastime they can share with friends and family.

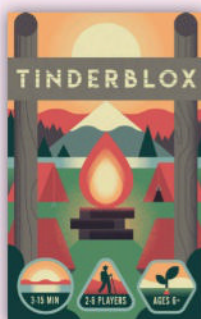
This is bitter medicine indeed for those of us who appreciate slickly constructed puzzles, interesting choices, and, you know, at least the pretence that the game you're playing wasn't cobbled together in five minutes entirely from objects at arms' length after the designer forgotten they were supposed to be pitching over Zoom.

Indeed, as someone burdened with onerous duty of playing lots of games every week, *Knot Game* is a refreshing change of pace, even its four lines of block caps rules text sounding noncommittal and apologetic: 'DO AS MANY KNOTS AS POSSIBLE IN A FIXED AMOUNT OF TIME, FOR EXAMPLE IN 5 MINUTES. THE ONE WHO MADE THE MOST KNOTS WINS.' It doesn't have to be five minutes! Just as long as it's finite and not subject to alteration mid-game. (The makers thoughtfully provide a



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Rules card
- ▶ 20 Knot cards
- ▶ Carabineer
- ▶ Stick
- ▶ 2 Ropes
- ▶ Timer



sand timer in the box, which runs to one minute, a duration mentioned nowhere in the rules – but hey, free sand-timer!)

The rest of the contents of this disquietingly maverick offering are two pieces of rope, a little carabineer clip, and a length of wooden dowelling. A stick. Then there are some big cards with illustrated instructions on how to tie a bowline knot, a running bowline, a distel hitch AND MORE. In what order should you approach these knots of wildly differing difficulty? Doesn't say. How should you navigate the fact that many of the knots require both pieces of rope, or the single carabineer clip, thus making them useless for a two-player game? The rules maintain a dignified – some would say alluring – silence.

The name *Knot Game*, may, in fact, serve as a pithy two-word review, both of its status as a ludic experience and as of how your friends are likely to feel when you ask them if they'd like to play it.

But wait. Surely this Marcel Duchamp-esque Dadaist broadside against the decadence of modern boardgaming doesn't possess some redeeming features? Surely it can't be... whisper it... *fun*?

Game designer Nick Bentley wrote an interesting Twitter thread where he analysed a trivia game on Amazon that has sold over half a million copies. He pointed out that, following the rules as written, the game is broken, and a player who repeatedly passes rather than answering questions will always win. But reading reviews and comments, he discovered most players just invented house rules for scoring. They didn't care about the perfunctory design – they just wanted a cheap box of trivia questions they could use for impromptu quizzes.

The thing about *Knot Game* is... it's actually quite fun, trying to tie a difficult new knot with a time constraint. It's definitely funny to watch. It's also, if not useful in the everyday sense, quite a cool skill to learn. These are real knots with practical applications.

If you run a tabletop roleplaying game and you want to introduce a fresh dexterity element like the Jenga towers players remove blocks from in *Dread*, you could have rogues try to tie a knot with a timer running if they want to pick a lock. Or hackers trying to break into a mainframe. The harder the challenge, the more elaborate the knot card you hand them.

Getting this game out at the pub and letting friends take it in turns to attempt the same knot is actually... okay with the right group? The instruction cards are big, robust and easy to read. The components are good quality. *Knot Game* the game is appalling, and in some respects literally unplayable. But *Knot Game* the experience? I can't believe I'm saying this, but... it might be... knot bad? 🎣

TIM CLARE

PLAY IT? MAYBE

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TINDERBLOX

If your idea of fun is steady-hand electronic buzzer games, or versus cross-stitch, *Knot Game* is for you. More likely, if you enjoy dexterity games like *Tinderblox* and *Kittin*, and for some reason you hanker after a substantially worse experience (albeit with an educational aspect), you might like this.





# FEATHERLIGHT

**Designer:** Sabrina Von Contzen & Hanno Von Contzen | **Publisher:** Wizkids



**M**ost people dream of encountering their favourite actors, musicians, or sports heroes. I, on the other hand, strive to meet the potoo bird; a strikingly odd and sinister looking insectivore from South America. Granted, if I met one down a dark alleyway, I would likely flee from its giant illumined eyes, haunting cry, and gaping maw in a heartbeat.

For now, I'll settle for this quirky little hand-management game.

*Featherlight* follows the plight of Pauly the Potoo, who, after toppling from his nest, has scattered a mass of his (morphologically dubious) exuberantly colourful feathers. As players, we'll be competing to score the most points by amassing a coherent hand of combo scoring cards based on their colours, and, occasionally, how they interact with cards in the central 'nest'. (Potoo's don't construct nests, but I'm happy to go with it).

The influence of Wizkids' *Fantasy Realms* is clear here; the mechanics are near identical. But, in the case of *Featherlight*, things are streamlined further, making this an ideal introduction to hand-management games. Players are only managing a hand of five, and the public 'nest' is composed of just six. Regardless, there's still a wealth of interesting card combos to be made.

On the other hand, the goals vary from being seemingly too easy to achieve, or, in the case of requiring particular cards in the nest, wildly unpredictable. It's entirely possible to attain a decent hand early in the game, leading to a



rather dull process of either sustaining it or mixing it up purely as something to do.

With a bit of familiarity though, games can become surprisingly competitive, as players constantly shift their strategies, manipulate game length, and efficiently manage the nest. With discards being placed atop other nest cards, a touch of memory mechanics can come into play for players savvy enough to craftily dig for the cards they need. Furthermore, *Featherlight* is cleanly and brightly presented, and, quite simply, pleasing to look at.

**CHAD WILKINSON**

**PLAY IT? MAYBE**

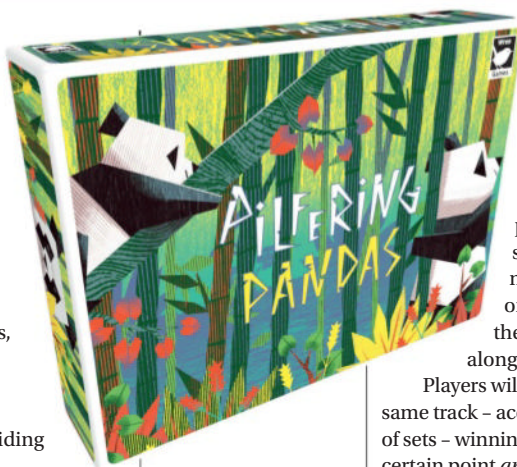
# PILFERING PANDAS

**Designer:** Janice Turner & Stu Turner | **Publisher:** Wren Games



**I**n the event of a breakout at the zoo, the last creature I'd suspect would be the panda: an animal often too lazy to even procreate and ensure its species' longevity. Anyhow, in *Pilfering Pandas*, players will embody these monochrome musteloids, pilfering various snacks from the zoo's residents to appease the meerkat masterminds, whilst avoiding the unwitting zookeeper. Mechanically, this takes the form of rummy - expanded and generously made playable solo, cooperatively, or competitively. There's even an app iteration.

Players will be creating sets (suits or numerical) with cards either drawn blind or taken from the communal



'hideout'. Taking one card is generally risk-free, but there's also the option to take any number of consecutive cards. Doing so opens up the possibilities for more sets (there's no limit to number of sets played on a turn), but advances the zookeeper token along the escape track.

Players will be advancing this same track - according to the value of sets - winning upon reaching a certain point *and* having emptied their hands, but losing immediately if the zookeeper catches up. Consequently, whether players are grabbing more cards or submitting sets, the game maintains a strong sense of tension. Personally, the risk/reward nature of the hideout feels more dramatic in the cooperative mode, with the

competitive version instead feeling like a nice alternative for familiar players.

Considering its humble rummy-based origins and small size, *Pilfering Pandas* is incredibly pretty. The flat, angular art style and colour palette incongruously evokes the character of these mischievous animals - a stylised realism I'm sure most could appreciate.

Additionally, with various play modes and difficulty levels, there's decent replay value - especially for a game whose main mechanic feels so traditionally familiar. Actually winning the co-op game at higher difficulties is nicely challenging - especially when abiding by the default communication rules - ultimately making success feel that much sweeter. I don't hold much hope for the newly liberated pandas though.

**CHAD WILKINSON**

**PLAY IT? YES**



# MY LIL' EVERDELL

Building make-believe cities in the forest with your friends

Designer: James A. Wilson, Clarissa A. Wilsonb | Publisher: Starling Games

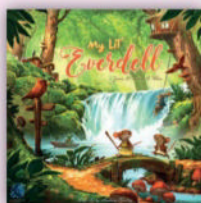


**E**verdell is a brilliant game, with a luscious theme, but it does require a fair amount of concentration. For players with analysis paralysis, there can be a lot of thought required in making the optimum move, especially when trying to predict for future cards and the actions of other players. As a result, it's not necessarily the best introduction for new players or children – which is why *My Lil' Everdell* exists.

Taking the over-an-hour concept of *Everdell* and condensing it into a half hour game has been done with care and attention. The world building of the bigger title is still here; but now you all play woodland animal kids, trying to put together a play city. *My Lil' Everdell* is a worker placement game where you use your meeples – or “friends” – to collect resources such as the disturbingly-edible-looking berries to build cards. These cards, featuring cute constructions such as Pirate Ships or Gliders, score you further resources or gain points for final scores at the end of the game.

It's a fast game; there are just four rounds of three turns each, which whistle past at lightning speed. Much like the best worker placement games, there are never quite enough locations to place workers, and absolutely never enough turns to achieve half of what you wanted to. The core of early strategy is split between gaining the green cards that grant resources every round, and blue cards that reward specific cards built *after* them; and to do so whilst everyone else is trying to buy the same cards.

This game plays brilliantly with children, who can grasp the basic concepts almost immediately. Iconography is straightforward, pretty and fairly intuitive – two sticks at the top of the Air Balloon card mean it costs two sticks to build. There are some clunky elements – for example, the difference between tan cards that only pay out once, and green one that pay out every turn should have been made clearer – but generally *My Lil' Everdell* is quick



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Gameboard
- ▶ 4 Home boards
- ▶ 4 Custom resource dice
- ▶ 1 8-Sided die
- ▶ 12 Friend meeples (3 butterflies, 3 foxes, 3 lizards, 3 mice)
- ▶ 59 Cards
- ▶ Berries, twigs, resin, and various tokens



to pick up, whilst not also being immediately clear how to master.

I played several times with two non-English speaking adults, who picked it up very quickly. For a children's game, it's actually rather enjoyable for adults, a suitable play-whilst-you-chat option, or as a palate cleanser between meatier games. This is a notable difference from other child-version type games such as *Catan Junior* or *My First Carcassonne*, which are either much too luck based, or rely on such a simple strategy that adults will quickly be bored. The solo mode is particularly sleek, and manages to be testing without adding complication.

Part of my review testing was with a hardcore gamer friend, and we had a tense and enjoyable battle together. I didn't feel quite that I'd had the full

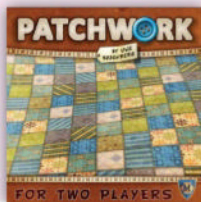
range of options that a 'proper' adult game provides, but we also played twice in the time that you'd still be getting things out of the box for *Twilight Imperium*.

Whilst the weird placement of the apostrophe in the title is inexcusable – if they had to use one, it should be “My Li'l Everdell” as that's where letters have been removed – I otherwise think *My Lil' Everdell* is an excellent game, and actually one that would be a great addition to a much wider range of collections than its marketing as a kid-friendly title would make you think. ●

**CHRIS LOWRY**

## PLAY IT? YES

Not one for everyone, but ideal for families, and for adults who want to play something simple but still satisfying. Plus the lizard meeples are super cute.



## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED PATCHWORK

...Two completely different games, but each has a soft theme, a similar play length, beginner friendliness and an experience that gets tighter and more competitive towards the finish line.





### WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game board
- ▶ 32 Action cards
- ▶ 4 Crew miniatures
- ▶ 24 Door tokens
- ▶ 13 Switch tokens
- ▶ Plastic computer room module
- ▶ 2 Dice

# 15 MINUTES TO SELF-DESTRUCT

Keep rollin', rollin', rollin', rollin'...

**Designer:** Richard Heayes & Petter Ilander | **Publisher:** Tactic



**D**o you enjoy rolling dice? Do you like the idea of relentlessly rolling dice while listening to third-rate sci-fi sound effects? Perhaps you crave the thought of trying desperately to roll a particular number while increasingly staring into the infinite abyss of frustration? Well, boy on boy, have we got just the game for you!

*15 Minutes to Self-Destruct* is a bit like the classic pub game, Shut the Box – if Shut the Box had a wafer-thin theme slapped over it and far more tedious gameplay. In this co-operative game you and four other players take on the role of a spaceship crew trapped in deep space. Unfortunately, thanks to a pesky computer malfunction, the self-destruct sequence has been activated (perhaps because the computer played this game and decided it was better to end it all, rather than carry on) and all the doors are shut. You'll have to work together to open those doors and get to the escape pod.

Now, of course, you're wondering how to open those doors. Well, it involves rolling dice... time and time and time and time and time again. You have two D6 at your disposal and you must roll them together. You can then open doors using a single number on a die, or add them

together to open a single door. For example, if you rolled four and five, you could open doors four and five, or door nine. However, it is beyond frustrating when you can't get the correct numbers. In one of our playthroughs one player was trapped in their starting position for FIVE minutes. Five minutes of soulless dice rolling, watching other doors open and close while they could do nothing.

Once you've opened a door, you can then move around different areas of the spaceship to switch on 'activation' switches. Unfortunately, despite us checking numerous times, these switches do not 'activate' any fun. Instead, you've got to switch on all 12 switches before heading your way to the escape pod. The issue is that the game makes it almost impossible to, not only open the correct doors, but also flip the switches required. What's more, there are zero tactical decisions to be made because everything is at the mercy of the dice gods.

Things are spiced up a little by the action cards. You see, if you can't use both of the numbers on your dice you are punished with an Action Card, which will change the game slightly; typically by messing with the result on a die. To compound the

inherent frustrations in *15 Minutes to Self-Destruct*, sometimes the Action Cards will arbitrarily lock doors you've previously opened or even deactivate a switch you've worked so hard to activate. Cue screams of anger and dice being thrown across the room.

And as for the 15 minute element of the game, that's because it requires an app to play. Now sometimes, in titles like *Mansions of Madness*, the app becomes an integral element of the gameplay, which drives the story forward and builds the tension. Here the app is basically a glorified watch timer that counts down from 15 minutes, accompanied by some sci-fi sound effects. Arguably this is the highlight of the game. And if a timer with the odd 'bleep bloop' noise on it is the highlight, then you know you're in trouble. 🍌

**ROB BURMAN**

### PLAY IT? NO

The co-operative gaming space is – somewhat ironically, perhaps – very competitive. There are so many other titles out there looking to fill that space in your gaming library and *15 Minutes to Self-Destruct* comes up woefully short. Those 15 minutes of relentless dice rolling will seem like the longest 15 minutes of your life, and you'll soon wish you could be jettisoned into deep space, if only to avoid playing again.

### TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED FRUSTRATION

The same luck-based dice-rolling mechanics run through both these games, as does the same frustration when you can't leave the starting spot!





# STUPEFY!

**Designer:** Ludovic Maublanc | **Publisher:** Repos Production



Even if you somehow manage to put aside the absolutely cursed state of the *Harry Potter* franchise and its creator, *Stupefy!* is a confounding choice for a new version of *Cash'n'Guns*. This party game, first released in 2005, saw players

imagine themselves as members of a gangster band who are attempting to split the loot among themselves but are finding that it's far easier to shoot everyone and then take the treasure. So, everyone armed themselves with foam guns and prepared to bluff and shoot their way to riches.

In *Stupefy!*, the same actions take place. Only now players are students of *Hogwarts*. They are practicing spells, namely *Stupefy*, and instead of competing for loot, they are trying to get the most house points. Most heartbreakingly, the foam guns are replaced by plastic wands. If the foam guns were purposefully ridiculous and therefore it was a joy to wave them around, the wands look...sad. They have been given just enough detail to look good from afar, but as soon as you hold one in your hand, all the charm wears off. Too light and with details too washed out, there is no joy

in waving them around.

Perhaps, *Stupefy's* only improvement over the original is that there is no longer player elimination. Stupefied players now take a delay token and return to cast spells the next round. Players with the most delay tokens get a penalty to their house score at the end of the game.

Yet, this change is not enough to bring back the magic. The new theme bends itself backward to fit with the original mechanics of the game but fails to convince. The division into four houses makes games with the non-equal number of players in each house feel awkward. The wands just make you earn back by the ridiculousness of the foam guns. *Stupefy!* just proves that it is more fun to be a muggle. 🍷

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

**PLAY IT? NO**

# WATCHMOJO: THE PARTY GAME

**Designer:** Uncredited | **Publisher:** Luma Games



While *Cards Against Humanity* has many detractors, it is impossible to deny its success. Copycat games were sure to follow, with *WatchMojo: A Super Fan Top 10 Party Game* falling unapologetically into this category. For the uninitiated, WatchMojo is a popular website and app that has collated hundreds of Top 10 lists as videos in categories such as TV, music, video games, and comics. What a way to make a living.

At this point, I expect many of you have already put two and two together to get generic party game. For the rest, in the box you'll find 400 cards, game board, and dry erase marker. A player ('the Ranker') flips one of the 100 Lists cards, reads it out, and the other players choose one from their hand of seven Entry cards and play it face down to a pile. This is made up to 10

cards from the draw deck (if required, depending on player numbers) and the Ranker shuffles them, puts them on the board as a top 10 list (see what they did there?), then some players get some points.

Question examples include, 'Things that can ruin your day' and, 'Things

that are better with butter'. Answers include Plankton, Fat Thor, and Jack the Ripper. The game ends when each player has been the Ranker twice, but as with any solid party game you simply play until everyone gets bored. Which with WatchMojo could be quite quickly because, after giggling at a few good answers, sorting 10 cards into an order is quite boring for everyone involved.

If someone asked me my top 10 party games WatchMojo certainly wouldn't make the cut. There are worse ways to spend half an hour or so, but it just seems so pointless. It adds one new element to the *Cards Against Humanity* idea that makes the game less fun, so why not stick with the original? 🍷

CHRIS MARLING

**PLAY IT? NO**







# SOUND BOX

The game Michael Winslow has been waiting for\*

Designer: Hjalmar Hach & Lorenzo Silva | Publisher: Horrible Guild



**H**ave you ever wondered what a helicopter with indigestion in a hurricane might sound like? What about a snorkelling firefighter using a frying pan? Can you only imagine what heaven sounds like on New Year's Eve during an earthquake with some drunk people fighting? All of these questions and more will be answered in *Sound Box* – a cacophonous co-operative party game that you might want to be careful where you play.

On paper *Sound Box* really seems like it wouldn't work. In fact, it hardly appears like it would be a game at all. Each round, one person is blindfolded and becomes the 'listener' while the other players will be the Soundmakers. The listener must try and identify the sounds the rest of the team are making, e.g. a spaceship battle or a zoo. So far, so simple, right? The issue is that the Soundmarkers are producing all the sounds at the same time. The result is a mad medley of whoops, shouts, beeping and spluttering that lasts 13 seconds.

What's clever is the way *Sound Box* 'gamifies' this simple premise. To begin with you only have 10 sounds that are randomly selected. These noises are displayed along the left hand side of the game board and can be seen by everyone before the round begins. This ensures that everyone at least has some idea of the potential noises that are about to be made. The skill comes in telling the difference between 'drunk people fighting' and 'drinking night'. And, of course, there are some rules to adhere to as a Soundmaker. You can't speak, for example, or hum a recognisable tune.

Once the din has ended, the listener guesses what sounds they heard. For each one they get right they move further up the progress track, but for each incorrect answer they lose a life (or multiple lives, depending upon the token). Now, you may think that getting sounds correct is good – and you'd mostly be right. However, by moving further up the progress track, you



unlock more room for potential noises and by the end of the game you've got 20 to choose from. Good luck!

As if that wasn't hard enough, you also unlock 'Double Sound' markers. When a Soundmaker has these they have to produce two sounds in the 13 seconds. The good news is, if the listener can make out these extra sounds, then they progress further up the track. Hooray! Thankfully you can lose the Double Sound markers if you lose too many lives on the heart track.

We mostly played at four players, which seemed like a reasonable number, but things are slightly complicated at six or seven players. In these games one player is the 'Recorder'. This is a bit of an odd role because they're blindfolded, like the listener, and then must repeat the noises they heard in the 13 seconds to try and help the listener while guessing. Although it's fun to watch

the Recorder trying to re-produce the sounds, we probably preferred the game without this role.

On the other hand, a nice touch is the inclusion of sounds that are suitable for kids. These are marked with a star on the card and stop children having to make slightly dubious noises, like hell or a dangerous suburb. ●

**ROB BURMAN**

## PLAY IT? YES

*Sound Box* certainly won't be for everyone. It's a loud and brash party game that requires you to put your inhibitions aside and pretend to be a 'laser sword' or 'hospital' like you really mean it. But in the right setting – probably not your FLGS, to be honest – and with the right crowd, this is a rowdy riot.

\*ask your parents about that reference, kids



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game board
- ▶ 110 Sound cards
- ▶ 20 Number tokens
- ▶ Progress marker
- ▶ Heart marker
- ▶ Audio bag
- ▶ 2 Double sound markers
- ▶ Sand timer
- ▶ Guesser glasses
- ▶ Recorder glasses

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED MONIKERS

Both take a simple premise and turn it into a fun, if somewhat silly, party game.





# LAND OF CLANS

A subtly strategic scottish scuffle

**Designer:** Richard Heaves & Petter Llander | **Publisher:** Tactic



I'm debating with myself whether it's a good thing for a game to have a theme that works well whilst being so amorphous as to be adaptable to literally any other theme. The answer's subjective I guess, but let's take a look at an example.

*Land of Clans* is a two to four player game of building and/or stealing castles in the Scottish Highlands. Players will be taking turns playing cards to place counters out on the board and hopefully arranging them into particular patterns. Once a pattern is achieved, counters are replaced with the corresponding castle tile. Points from constructed castles will be awarded as soon as a player builds their fourth castle, with the player amassing the most points being the winner.

Essentially, what we have is a contested space, and the means to plop down some shapes. The image of warring clans undoubtably fits well,



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game Board
- ▶ 60 Wooden tokens
- ▶ 16 Wooden castles
- ▶ 108 Cards
- ▶ 19 Win tiles
- ▶ 19 Castle tiles
- ▶ Textile bag



but at the same time it hardly hints at the richness of Scottish history. We could just as easily be designing a garden or populating a circuit board. Even the long-locked Scots gracing the box look like they've just remembered they're supposed to be somewhere else.

Fortunately, unlike its opaque theme, there are enough touches to keep players focused, most notably with how counters are placed. Typically, players will choose one card from a hand of five to play on a turn. The card will correspond to one or two spots on the grid-like board and the player will subsequently place a counter there. Usually this will be in order to work towards fulfilling one of the four castle patterns currently on display, each of which being worth between three to seven points.

Alternatively, (or sometimes coincidentally) counters can be placed adjacent to finished castles and subsequently attacked. As long as the attacker has at least as many adjacent counters as the defender, they may play any number of cards depicting swords to attempt to overthrow it. If the defender can't respond with a matching number of shields, the castle (and its points) are seized by the attacker.

This is a very simple and accessible game, and consequently combat isn't particularly exciting. Nonetheless, it still forms an integral part of the later stages of the game. It's quite likely that a game will be won after a sudden assault, but even throughout the game ownership can seesaw back and forth. What starts out as a relatively passive pattern-building game soon grows into a tense area-control like scrum, and for the most part it works – although, not surprisingly, at three players there is the unfortunate inevitability of 'king-making'.

*Land of Clans* plays out like a family-weight mash-up of *Bunny Kingdom* and *Tiny Towns*. But where *Bunny Kingdom* is a game whose fantastic gameplay caught me by surprise, *Land of Clans* likely just caught me in a good mood. I enjoyed my time with it and felt somewhat refreshed by its simplicity in the context of similar games, but it later dawned on me that behind its familiar historical beige-ness, *Land of Clans* is, quite plainly, a family game. Of course, there's nothing wrong with a great family game, but *Land of Clans* occupies a space of adequate 'good-ness'.

Whilst it's worthy of some attention, *Land of Clans'* lack of flash and childish allure too easily brings to mind the type of game only encountered when moving house; a mysterious box, tattered not from years of use, but from the weight of its rivals in the games cupboard. **CHAD WILKINSON**

## PLAY IT? MAYBE

Fleetingly fun but perhaps a touch forgettable.

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED BUNNY KINGDOM

A lighter take on grid-based card-play and area-control.



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# PANDEMIC LEGACY: SEASON 1

Saving the world is your responsibility, and you aren't very good at it.

Words by **Chris Lowry**

**T**he first time the world ended was traumatic. Of course it was. Everyone died - that's not the sort of thing you forget easily, is it? Especially when it was your poor decision-making that led to the untimely demise of billions. It leaves the kind of mental scars that wakes one up in the night; trembling as you take your own temperature.

At least, that was my response. The first time. By the fourth complete collapse of civilisation? I was just plain annoyed. The shock had gone, that queasy feeling deep inside barely registering. I just couldn't believe that everyone had died from the blue virus *again*! We'd cured one disease, pretty impressively, and completely eradicated it from the globe. Our names had been mentioned in the World Health Organisation's email newsletter and everything!

Sadly, whilst our attention had been overly focused on a specific area, London had deteriorated into riots, and fountains of infectious diarrhoea began to erupt across Europe. By the time our Dispatcher had frantically scrambled a jet to Essen, Paris had fallen, becoming inaccessible without significant effort. Our Researcher was just getting close to curing the black plague, when St. Petersburg unexpectedly suffered an Outbreak, triggering unstoppable tides of lurgy throughout Eastern Europe. Nearly everyone in the world died. *Again*.

We set up for our fifth game of *Pandemic Legacy: Season 1* with heavy hearts. For those unfamiliar, *Pandemic* is a game of grappling against global diseases. In this case, the Center for Disease Control had recruited us, a team of specialists, to treat, cure, and hopefully eradicate four deadly pathogens. Alongside our Dispatcher and Researcher, we had a Medic, great at cleaning up disease on the map, and myself, the Generalist. I'm one of those jack-of-all-trades, master-of-none people; I do a little more than everyone else, but I do it all a little less well.



## PANDEMIC LEGACY: SEASON 1

*Pandemic Legacy: Season 1* was released in 2015 and eight years later is still ranked second on the Board Game Geek global games rankings. One of the original legacy games, and arguably the first to perfect the recipe, it's helped thousands of people ruin the world endless times. Ideal for a regular gaming group to work through over the course of a few months, and if you enjoy it, there is *Season 2* - and *Season 0* - to pick up afterwards...

The "legacy" aspect of *Pandemic Legacy* means that games tie together and decisions have staying power. Research stations built in January remain on the board in February... but so do the panic and civil unrest markers in cities. Problems have a nasty habit of recurring, often in similar places.

There are also an array of intriguing boxes and envelopes to open as you progress through the months. These contain game-altering rules changes and plot twists, but I won't share any of that here. (The plot twist below is my own addition, giving an idea of the possibilities without spoiling anything present in the actual game for you). Horrifyingly, it was revealed that the blue disease - nicknamed "Nastybug" by us - had been bioengineered to become extra-virulent. To begin curing blue

cubes in a city now cost a blue card!

Having completely botched two scenarios in each of the opening months of the year, we were now onto the March scenarios.

*Pandemic Legacy* makes allowances for poor performance, giving you a funding level that increases in response to your failures; we were now at funding level ten - the maximum amount. This gave us access to the full range of bonus Funded Event cards, allowing players one-off enhancements, such as pausing new infections for a turn, or taking extra actions.

Each scenario commences with setting up the board state, revealing where infection will be most heavily concentrated at the start of your game. Nine cards dictate which cities have one cube of disease, or two, or three. One of January's missions had been doomed by a terrible card draw that led to two heavily infected cities next to each other. If any city would gain an extra cube above three, they instead have an Outbreak, placing an additional cube in *every* adjacent city. If that additional cube would take a city above three? An Outbreak takes place there too, sending *another* cube to cities





We started off at our newest research station, located in Cairo.

Epidemics occur five times in the game, and cause another burst of infection in a new city on the board. The Medic drew the card for location: “Bogota.” Relief about avoiding blue territories

Hope drained away. Once again, the world was hanging on a knife edge, with just four weary specialists standing between a global pandemic and total disaster. There was no one else to do the job. We looked round the table at each other and allowed ourselves a moment of quiet reflection. Then we rolled up our sleeves, and got back to work... 🏡







# NO RULE

Our round up of the good, the bad and the ugly of non-gaming, nearly-gaming, sort-of-gaming stuff

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

## GAME MASTER SCREEN, DRAGON SHIELD

There's a lot of ways to draw the veil between your players and the adventure you're taking them on. Few are as heavy duty as this latest offering from Dragon Shield. We picked up the lovely deep-coloured blood red version – and it's heavy. The screen all snaps together with magnetic edges, so you're never going to lose your notes from this one. There's also the classic clear plastic holders within, so you can slip information in as you need to. A nice touch is the wipe clean pen and blank cards. These can be scribbled on and then slotted in the top of the DM screen, or, as I imagine, being scribbled on and chucked at the player who deserves it most. The backing within the GM screen is a soft and smooth synthetic material which should allow a 'zero rip' experience when you shove your next set of monster in ten minutes before everyone arrives. Surprisingly, this is worth the money, especially if it's the one you plan to use for the next ten years.



£40

GET IT? YES

WORTH  
PEEKING  
OVER

## G-GRIP

In an attempt to improve the photography of miniatures and games in the magazine, we were offered one of these handy triggers for your phone from G-Grip. It has a sticky attachment that stay on the phone case, and then you can clip a very simple shutter button and grip on. Suddenly you're able to take photos without poking the screen and losing focus (the pain of the miniatures photographer), and it offers up new angles as you're able to angle and fit the lens into more dynamic positions. While anything is an upgrade on just poking your phone.



£59

GET IT? YES

SNAPPIER  
SNAPS

## LIFE COUNTERS DOUBLE DIALS, GAMEGENIC

These very pleasing health trackers are great for all manner of games, and ended up being really useful for general points tracking too. We picked up the island and colour gradient versions and they're really quite pretty, very sturdy and have a satisfyingly resistant dial action that's not going to get knocked during a game. It's a simple thing to add to your game toolkit,



but one that actually pays dividends at the table.



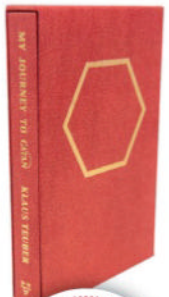
£10

GET IT? YES

ONE  
TO COUNT  
ON

## MY JOURNEY TO CATAN, ACONYTE

With the sad news that Klaus Teuber, the creator of *Catan*, which is frankly the lodestone of this hobby, passed away this month at 70 years old, we thought it time to recommend his life. *My Journey To Catan* is a memoir about his journey from being a board game enthusiast to amateur designer to the legend he is today. He changed the gaming world in 1995, and you might want to spend some time finding out how and why, in his own words. The book comes in a beautiful hardback slipcase and contains totally unseen photos. A good read, a lovely object, a fitting tribute.



WHERE  
IT ALL  
BEGAN



£70

GET IT? YES



# S REQUIRED

## MAGIC: THE GATHERING UNPAINTED MINIATURES: RESERVOIR KRAKEN, WIZKIDS

Bloody love a sea monster, me. There's something just very cool and satisfying about them when they're presented in games. They're alien in a way that's not just 'human plus something'; it's grounded in the natural world's own true horror. This big resin model was a joy to paint. Arriving, to my surprise, completed, it was also much less frustrating than I imagined. The model comes in two pieces, the kraken and its water-gush of a stand making getting those hard to reach tentacles a lot easier. It sits about six inches tall once properly affixed. A great addition for any time your players so much as wander near a puddle.



JUST  
KRAKEN ON  
WITH IT



£55

GET IT? YES

## CARD STANDS, GAMEGENIC

We were really sceptical about these card stands and their uses. This set of ten card stands (which end up being quite a lot cheaper than the RRP) are designed for holding and displaying cards (including sleeves) at your gaming table or on a shelf alongside your favourite collectables. We've used them in game for handy reminders to players of area and location effects in RPGs (paired with the wipe clean cards mentioned in the GM Screen write up on this page) and as a way to nicely arrange cards. It's not going to be the most necessary thing in the world, but if you're someone interested in collecting those oversized cards that aren't really legal for gameplay, then this is a great way to show them off without breaking the bank. Available in assorted colours.



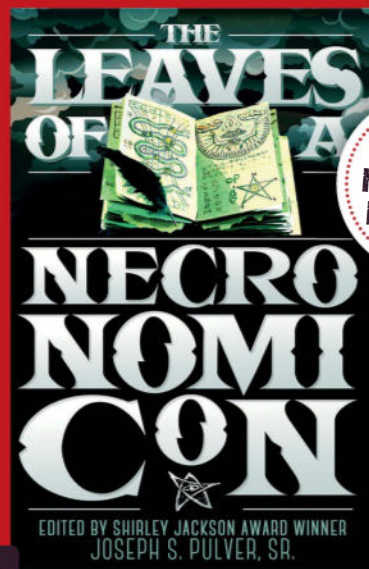
£10

GET IT? YES

IN  
STAND-ARD  
ROTATION

## THE LEAVE OF THE NECRO- NOMICON, CHAOSIUM

This 'braided novel' from tentacles-and-madness-purveyors Chaosium is a superb exploration of not only horror, but also very good games-adjacent writing. Novel and stories that sit across the café from games are often a bit rubbish (sorry!) but this is truly good writing from some of the best in the business. Pulling together the likes of S. P. Miskowski, Michael Cisco, Damien Angelica Walters, Nick Mamatas, Anna Tambour, and Jeffrey Thomas S. Pulver Sr. has edited together a deeply entertaining collection of short fiction. Each chapter of the novel is written by a different writer, following the infamous Necrocomicon as it changes hands throughout the years. It's not quite George Perec's *Life: A User's Manual*, but it's extremely entertaining. If you're someone who like a nibble at their novels, this is a great collection.



NECRO-  
NOMICON  
NIBBLES



\$18

GET IT? YES



## 2015



## New twists and big hits

Words by **Matthew Vernal**

**T**wenty fifteen marked a year of revisiting the past and preparing for the future. *Star Wars* returned to the silver screen with *The Force Awakens*, smashing box office records and reigniting love of the far away galaxy for many, the Paris Accords marked the first ever international treaty on climate change, with 195 countries pledging to help reduce the rate of global warming and who could forget the Octocentennial of the Magna Carta, marking 800 years of the greatest shake-up in Western politics? I mean, everyone forgot the last one sure, but there's certainly plenty of unforgettable gaming moments that happened in 2015 too. Join us as we look back on 2015!



### A GOOD YEAR FOR CHVÁTIL

It's always great to see a game developer receive the attention they deserve. Czech designer Vlaada Chvátil has been releasing games for decades, with titles such as *Galaxy Trucker* and *Mage Knight* seeing moderate success, but it was two titles in 2015 that saw him soar to tabletop acclaim.

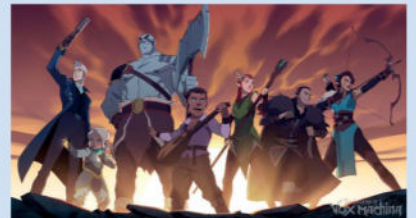
*Codenames* stood out like a peacock amongst the growing crowd of social deduction party games, splitting the table into two teams of secret agents, trying to covertly recall their coded agents whilst narrowly avoiding the attention of the Assassin. One player on each team knows the identities of their team's agents amongst the 25 possible codenames, as well as the fatal Assassin who will instantly lose them the game.



Trying to guide your team onto your wavelength through cryptic clues (as you can't say ANY of the words on the table) when a wrong move can spell immediate doom leads to thrills and giggles aplenty. The original has sold over a million copies, spawning countless spin offs such as *Disney* characters, *Pictures only*, a two-player co-op variant and also an 18+ *Deep Undercover* variant for innuendo aficionados.

The second title of 2015 that still stands proudly in BGG's Top 20 is the second edition of *Through the Ages: A New Story of Civilisation*. Whilst most changes were minor from the first edition, the artistic overhaul and restructuring of how military conflict is resolved gave this historic epic a new lease on life, allowing even more players to experience over three thousand years of history in less than three hours. The card-driven engine builder has players drafting and upgrading their empire, from technological achievements to new political structures to best suit their needs for generating culture to win.

As more variants of *Codenames* continue to release and *Through the Ages* remains cemented in the hearts of hardcore tabletop gaming enthusiasts, we have a lot to thank Mr Chvátil and 2015 for. De'kuji Vlaada!



### CRITICAL ROLE

Whilst roleplaying game podcasts have been around for quite some time, none of them have ever reached the same meteoric level of fame quite like these bunch of nerdy-ass voice actors.

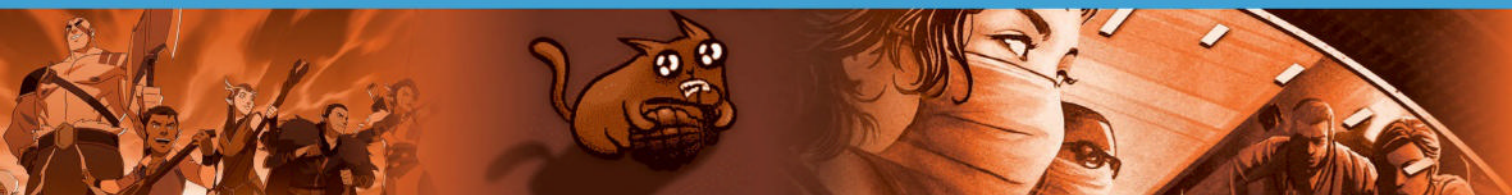
What started out as a regular meetup amongst friends in the voice acting industry, *Critical Role* has become a multimedia juggernaut spanning three campaigns, several books and a highly popular animated streaming series. Helmed by Matthew Mercer with a dedicated cast and many guest appearances by fellow actors, the show is quite literally an actual play of the group's roleplaying game sessions, which started off as a private game done for player/actor Liam O'Brien's birthday and now sees literally tens of thousands of fans from across the globe tuning in each week to watch their live streams, with many more catching up on streaming services.

The show premiered on *Geek and Sundry* when website owner Felicia Day heard about the game and approached the players with the idea of live-streaming their games, moving from their first home to Twitch in 2019 and now featured as one of the platform's biggest earners.

Celebrated for its diversity, dedication to long-running storylines and sheer brilliance of both players and DM, the show has continued to wow fans and led to the founding of *Critical Role Productions*, a creator-led and managed company and studio. For everyone who's watched or started their own live play series of roleplaying games in the last five years, it's likely that some influence can be attributed to this roleplaying games cultural touchstone.

➔ 2015 was big, but 2016 was MASSIVE. Every game features in





## EXPLODING KITTENS & OATMEAL GAMES

Tabletop gaming has seen more than its fair share of comic book adaptations with the countless Marvel/DC Comic games, but there's a growing market of games now inspired by webcomics, nearly all of which can attribute their existence to one game which focused on the volatility of purr-uliar felines.

With artwork and design by *The Oatmeal* creator Matthew Inman, *Exploding Kittens* is a fast paced farcical card game that sought to adapt Russian Roulette for a family audience. The aim of the game is to be the last person standing after everyone else has been on the receiving end of a cat-astrophe, as players draw from a deck of cards hoping to not reveal an Exploding Kitten, but going out of their way to play cards that will force others to either draw more or give us vital defuse cards that grant a second chance to anyone unfortunate enough to blow up.

The game initially went on Kickstarter with a modest goal of \$10,000, but soon soared past their target, raising \$1 million in its first seven hours and going on to raise over \$8 million, becoming Kickstarter's highest funded card game ever.

The game has also sold extremely well with over 11 million copies worldwide and numerous spin-offs, expansions and leading to the foundation of Exploding Kittens, a company dedicated to creating silly yet exhilarating games such as indoor dodgeball *Throw Throw Burrito* and the violent yet creative weirdness of *Poetry for Neanderthals*.

If you've yet to experience the dread of turning over cards and revealing a terrifying doom-moggie, chances are high someone you know has the game lurking, ready to pounce onto your next game night.



## PANDEMIC LEGACY

What happens when you take one of the best cooperative game systems and combine it with one of most innovative new



mechanics in tabletop gaming? Well you get one of the best board games ever made, a landmark title whose sequel was awarded the only Special Prize by the *Spiel Des Jahres* committee: *Pandemic Legacy*.

A collaborative work between *Pandemic* designer Matt Leacock and Legacy-system pioneer Rob Daviau, *Pandemic: Legacy* takes the core mechanics of saving the world from dangerous illnesses and adds a blockbuster narrative which spills out over multiple game sessions. The rulebook is suspiciously riddled with gaps as the core components share space with eight sealed boxes and a dossier of stickers, foreshadowing the surprises which start almost immediately into the first session.

Whilst many players balked at the idea of forever marking their games of Risk, in a narrative game where every session matters, the legacy elements of adding stickers or tearing up cards helped generate a memorable experience, as players are encouraged to grow attached to their characters, form bonds with mechanical effects and fear losing them with every outbreak.

To go into much more would spoil what is personally one of the best tabletop games ever, so grab yourself up to three friends to go on an unforgettable tabletop gaming experience!



# around the world in 80 plays

# SINGAPORE

Words by **Chad Wilkinson**

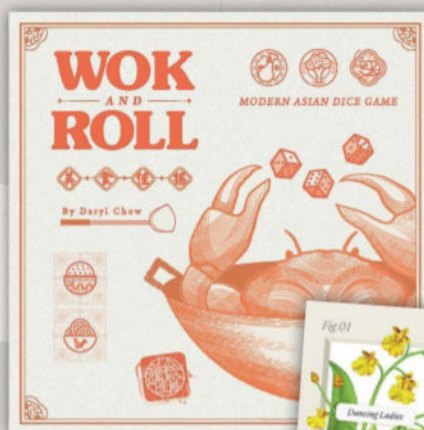
**T**his month we're off to Southeast Asia to visit the island country of Singapore. Being a densely populated and vastly multicultural country, Singapore would seem to be prime territory for a rich tabletop scene, and judging by the number of games cafes and stores, this seems to be a fair summation.

Within the Singapore capital alone, hobbyists can freely flit between large stores such as Games@Pi, and cafes including King and the Pawn, The Mind Cafe, and Settlers Cafe.

Whilst the aforementioned stores can be easily found amidst the streets and malls of Singapore City, it's likely that anyone heading south of Chinatown may (or may not!) come across the unassuming Experience Point games club. Behind its plain door, visitors will initially find themselves in what appears to be just a small storeroom. As it turns out, the real Experience Point occupies a hidden room behind a bookcase – accessed by pulling a particular volume from its shelf!

Many Singaporean cafes are hybrid hubs of gaming, with consoles sitting alongside traditional board games and roleplaying games. Some though, such as Dueller's Point and Battle Bunker, are more specialised, with an emphasis on CCGs or tabletop war games. In 2014, Kenny Tan of Battle Bunker featured in the popular Singapore FHM magazine, discussing the origins of the store as initially a means of gathering a gaming group. He further notes how *Warhammer 40,000* necessitates 'interacting meaningfully with an opponent' in contrast to increasingly popular online gaming.

In 2022, Singapore hosted the Asian Board Games Festival; a free, two day event dedicated to game designs from across Asia. Singaporean exhibitors included Capital Gains Studio, Good Spirit Games, MooMeeNyu Designs, and Origame. Of the four, Origame is perhaps the largest,



with a growing catalogue of gorgeous titles.

*Oh My. Orchids!* is a lovingly illustrated card game designed by Daryl Chow, about nurturing Singaporean flowers, whilst *Wok and Roll* is an attractive restaurant themed roll and write. Many of Chows other games also use food and drink as their theme, including *Durian*

*Dash* and *Kopi King*. Curiously, many titles from the Capital Gains Studio owned Mercat Games, feature food heavily, such as *Hotpot Havoc*, *Combo Cone Paradise*, and *Happy Dim Sum*.

The Asian Board Games Festival first appeared in 2019, and subsequently revealed Singapore's healthy appetite for all things tabletop, but with a new venue and increased promotion, 2022 was its biggest year yet. In an article written for Origame's website, Shihui Kee notes how attendance statistics for the Asian Board Games Festival challenged the prevailing image of tabletop gaming being a largely white/male-centric space, reporting that 'over fifty percent of participants were female from all ages and backgrounds'. Whilst this may not be a global indicator of changes in the hobby, it's still a positive representation of the demographics

in Singapore's rapidly growing and enthusiastic tabletop scene.

To demonstrate the ubiquity of tabletop gaming in Singapore, it's worth mentioning the work of Sonny Liew. Whilst commonly known as an award-winning graphic novelist, Liew recently dipped his toe into game design. Well, sort of. *Singapore 1819*

is an art project disguised as an Axis and Allies-esque board game, addressing the issues of British colonisation in an innovative way. In a touch of genius, Liew even brought in Quintin Smith from Shut Up & Sit Down to provide a bogus video review for the art installation. Not only does this reframe the idea of board games as art, but also demonstrates gaming seeping into other areas of Singaporean culture.

Singapore may be Southeast Asia's smallest country but this in no way translates to a small gaming culture. Of course, when it comes to games, it's the people that matter, and being the third most densely populated country in the world, Singapore has access to the sort of tightly concentrated community needed to rapidly propagate a vibrant tabletop scene. 🇸🇬



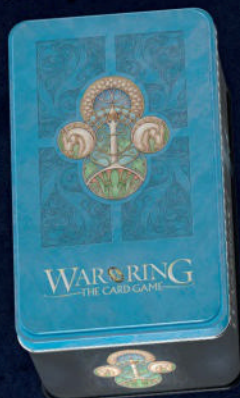


# "MY FAVORITE GAME OF LAST YEAR"

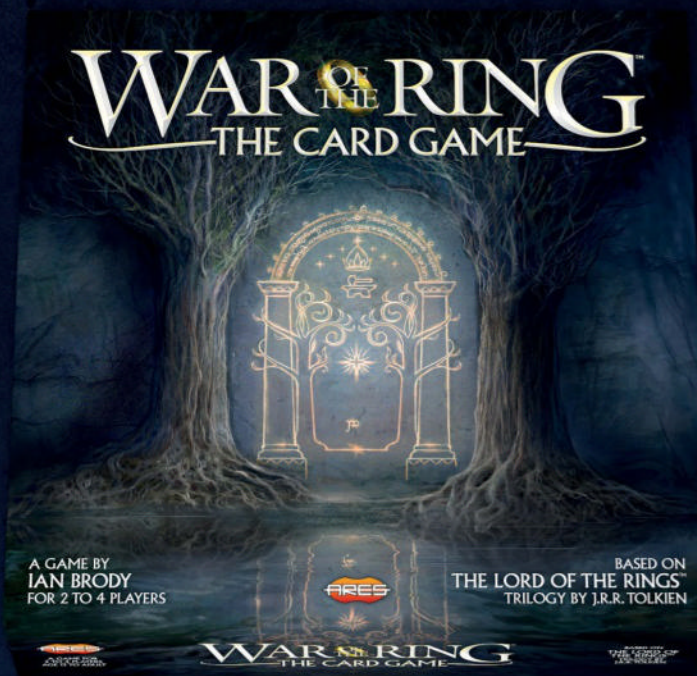
— ROY CANNADAY, THE DICE TOWER



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# ARK NOVA

A real keeper

Designer: Mathias Wigge | Publisher: Feuerland



Let's acknowledge the elephant in the room: this review comes after hearing a year's worth of gushing praise. Since its release, *Ark Nova* has won awards and become an instant fan favourite. It's been labelled "Hottest game of 2022" and has a lofty BoardGameGeek rating of 8.5. Tabletop Gaming even crowned it game of the year. Now that the buzz is calming, it is time to assess. Usually, reviews try to answer the question, "Is it any good?", but this one also begs, "Does it live up to the hype?"

If the title isn't a giveaway, *Ark Nova* has an animal theme of planning and designing a zoo. Now, the very word 'zoo' may be enough to have some

people exiting the room, such are the ethics around keeping creatures locked in captivity. Aware of potential queasiness, the rulebook stresses this is a 'scientifically managed' establishment – aka one more concerned with protecting animals than with daily visitor headcounts or performing seals. Money is discretely gained from kiosk ticket sales, and there is never any overt 'visitor' stage. These pains will still prove inadequate when convincing some people to participate, therefore it

is worth establishing where playmates stand on the issue before committing to a purchase.

When everyone is sitting comfortably with the theme's moral grey area, the fun begins with individual playing mats upon which the zoos are built. Numbers one to five run along the bottom of the mats where each person's action cards live. Players choose how to set them up – place a card in position one and it's worth one, for example – but from there on cards will move back to



## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED: TERRAFORMING MARS

Admirers of both *Terraforming Mars* and *Ark Nova* have rightly drawn comparisons between the two: the tile placement; symbol-dependent, card-driven play; set collection; the trackers... they're just worlds apart theme-wise.





position one whenever they are played, while the remaining cards shuffle along the line. This will have you plotting several steps ahead about the best order to carry out actions, a great use of down time should opponents take long-winded turns. Unlike in typical action-card devices, you never discard. Theoretically, therefore, the same action can be played consecutively if desired – a wonderful freedom. As the game develops, there's also the chance to upgrade actions from level one to two, often allowing double tasks.

The actions themselves include building enclosures and performing 'association' tasks, such as sending workers off to improve the zoo's reputation or partner with universities. Actions also activate zoo cards. Players get a starting hand of four of these, which could be a mix of three categories: animals, sponsors and conservation projects. At first, it's unlikely you'll be able to do much with the zoo cards as many rely on other stipulations to have been fulfilled. Take the diva-ish Siberian tiger, who demands three Asian continent symbols in a zoo and a whopping 30 bucks in the bank (not to mention the ten it costs to build its enclosure). Newbies may find it quite frustrating to be slapped with rules and restrictions: "Argh! I can't do anything I want!" they will sulk. "I'm not getting anywhere..."

... But get anywhere they shall. A tortoise crawl soon becomes a cheetah sprint as zoo-card combos come together with encouraging results. Recruit an ornithologist to boost funds when introducing new birds. Be rewarded for focusing on diddy creatures. Or massive ones. And if you're still feeling iffy about being a zookeeper? Appease that Jiminy Cricket voice by playing a conservation card to release an animal back into the wild!

One criticism occasionally levied against *Ark Nova* is that the zoo-card

pack is stacked far too high, at 212 cards. The outcome, critics complain, is time wasted on waiting for cards to come that never do. The antidote, however, is to adapt by playing the cards you do have, rather than the ones you want. As the animal kingdom proves, evolution is the key to surviving and thriving. And, of course, having so many cards affords a lot of replayability. Although you might want to also invest in an automatic shuffler when adding the game to your cart...

Results are tallied on a double-ended tracker. At one end lies 'appeal' – how attractive is the zoo to visitors? At the other resides 'conservation' – how much good is the zoo doing? Broadly speaking, appeal points are picked up via animals, while conservation points are collected via partnering, research and releasing animals. Focusing on either an appeal or conservation-heavy approach is viable in terms of winning, giving great scope for testing different strategies. Whichever is chosen, two counters will be placed at either end for each player, and it's when both counters meet or pass that the end is triggered. Final scoring is a compelling, if not slightly convoluted, process as conservation points are subtracted from appeal points (sort of). Scores suddenly transform from high doubles to skinny singles, and even negatives. It should be deterring, but somehow it is a hypnotising magic trick.

All of the above scratches at the surface of this pleasingly intricate game. There are take-that add-ons (based on animals, naturally – such as venom tokens that can be unleashed on opponents to force actions), zoo upgrades and special enclosures (playgrounds for the kiddies, aviaries for the birdies) and the break track (pick up some extra cash and reset the board). It's probably this variety that has won so many people round to *Ark Nova*. Designer Mathias Wigge clearly digs

his subject matter for real (he sponsors a monkey at his local zoo in Germany) and it shines through in a mechanically diverse offering that has tight play.

Whilst *Ark Nova* aces the difficult part without seemingly breaking a sweat, it is somewhat at the expense of the simple things. Quality is an issue: the individual player mats are made of a card stock so flimsy they could double as wobble board instruments. The player cubes? Just boring old cubes. The two tracker counters are identical and easily confused – upsetting the score if the wrong one gets moved. And the coffee cup break token looks like a wad of rhino dung. Stumble onto Etsy and you'll find everything from sticker meeple upgrades to paw-printed coins – a roaring trade that says more about component failings than the game's popularity.

More consideration was also needed in the graphic-design department. The various icons found on zoo cards are placed in an illogical fashion... you'll get used to it and eventually speak the language but it's a molehill to climb. Some cards are littered with information that overwhelms, while others have gappy blanks. Then there's the photography, which gives CBeebies/cheesy vibes – perplexing considering the 14+ age recommendation. A reskin in the not-too distant future would be a step closer to perfection.

Curiously, *Ark Nova's* problems are not enough to detract from what is a very strong proposition. It has the potential of a modern-day classic: the hex-tile placement, the set collection, the engine building. It also has one of the best uses of action cards, plus an abundance of replayability with a super-high deck of cards and double-sided player boards. Wigge has even been considerate enough to design the points tracker in landscape and portrait to work round different playing spaces.

So. Let's return to the original questions: Is *Ark Nova* any good? Yes. Does it live up to the hype? Yes. But is it the best it could be? Almost. ●

JENNY COX

### PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY

Believe the hype – *Ark Nova* brings in the punters with a variety most zoos would dream of. Some component and design irks veer towards ugly duckling, but overall this swan can hold its neck very high.



### WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 212 Zoo cards
- ▶ 11 Final scoring cards
- ▶ 12 Base conservation project cards
- ▶ 20 Double-sided action cards (5 per set)
- ▶ Game board
- ▶ Association board
- ▶ 8 Player mats
- ▶ 90 Standard enclosures tiles
- ▶ 12 Special enclosures tiles
- ▶ 34 Kiosk/pavilion tiles
- ▶ 15 Unique buildings
- ▶ 20 Partner zoos
- ▶ 12 Universities
- ▶ 9 Bonus tiles
- ▶ 70 Money tokens
- ▶ 20 X-tokens
- ▶ 8 Multiplier tokens
- ▶ 8 Venom tokens
- ▶ 8 Constriction tokens
- ▶ 1 Break token
- ▶ 12 Counters
- ▶ 16 Association workers
- ▶ 100 Player cubes
- ▶ 2 Organisers
- ▶ Glossary
- ▶ Icon overview
- ▶ Rulebook
- ▶ 1 Solo play tile





# SLEEPING GODS

## Fantastic Voyage

Designer: Ryan Laukat | Publisher: Red Raven Games



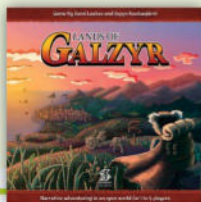
The sun was beginning to set when Kannan's sharp eyes spotted the beach, just a small patch of sand bordering jungle. "I think this could be the spot" he said, referring to a tattered map fragment obtained from the trader a few days ago. Captain Sofi Odessa took the glasses and nodded agreement. "Aye, you can see the entrance to the underground cave as well ...but who are those folk gathered around the fire?" Rafa came bounding up on deck "lets get the boat launched and set off right away". "Not so fast young man" grizzled sea dog Laurence joined in from his fishing station, "we need more fish, Mac and Kasumi are still in sick bay following that giant sand squid fight, Audrie's asleep in the engine room and I'm dead on my feet".

Welcome to *Sleeping Gods*; an open-world storybook driven RPG in three acts. Captain Odessa and her likeable crew of 8 have been transported to another world. In order to return home they must help the gods of this world awoken by finding their totems which are hidden throughout the archipelago (75 in all).



### WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 90 Adventure cards
- ▶ 32 Market cards
- ▶ 180 Quest cards
- ▶ 54 Event cards
- ▶ 60 Ability cards
- ▶ 78 Enemy cards
- ▶ 9 Crew boards
- ▶ Ship board
- ▶ Journey log sheets
- ▶ Command, damage, resource and other tokens
- ▶ Ship miniature
- ▶ Storybook
- ▶ Atlas
- ▶ Achievement sheet



Dividing crew members between players (or, much more simply, playing solo and managing them all) you are free to sail and explore absolutely anywhere in the atlas, gradually learning more about this strange world and its inhabitants. You will soon find folk needing help, monsters to slay and puzzles to unravel. Often you will be given broad indications where to travel – a volcanic island to the east for example – and, once there, if the keyword from the quest giver matches the location entry in the storybook you are in the right place.

Of course you never get owt for nowt in any world and as usual with RPGs you will be taking skill tests to overcome difficulties, sometimes with alternative approaches. All crew members with the relevant skill may participate but the downside is that they become fatigued and can only help once more before resting.

The storybook always gives you the negative consequences of failing so you can judge how cautious to be. After totalling crew skills you draw a card from the ability deck to complete the check. Since these ability cards may also be equipped or held in hand the deck can be gradually strengthened during each act – important for the challenging combat encounter at the end of each act. Combat is really ingenious and involves choosing a four member strike team, carefully targeting the most dangerous enemy parts and wisely allocating damage suffered. Ports are havens for rest, healing and repairs. You can also buy useful items, including recipes to keep the ship at sea for longer, and convert experience points into new crew abilities. You only fail if all crew members reach zero health or the ship takes full damage, but this should be rare.

This is a lengthy game – 3 acts of 18 turns each, with an act taking around 4 hours (playing solo), but it can be saved between sessions. The turn sequence is simple – take an action on the ship, resolve an event card and then take two travel or exploration actions. You will need to manage Command (obtained from ship actions) to equip and activate abilities and again that is much simpler in solo mode.

Upon completion you will get one of a number of endings depending on the totems acquired and you can score the campaign, but the real story is there in your annotated world map and in memories of strange and rewarding encounters along the way. ●

**DEBBIE BROWN**

### PLAY IT? YES

A completely open world adventure featuring a likeable cast and offering many strange adventures. A particularly strong solo experience.

### TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED LANDS OF GALZYR

In this light hearted romp animal characters travel the map using their skills to complete quests, and unusually the game has no real ending, the world just rolls over to the next session.



# ANTEMATTER

## Anteclimax

Designer: Ada McDonell Moline | Publisher: Bardshark



**G**ambling is a thorny subject in gaming, especially when it comes to the kind of designer or hobby board games, we spend a lot of our time covering at the magazine. It both feels a bit dirty if you end up playing with real money, and somewhat pointless when you don't. As a mechanic within other games we're happy to put our resources on the line, but that's usually paired with a choice we've made – rather than throwing us into a classic gambling game instead.

*Antematter* is a game of sci-fi poker. You know when the space-faring heroes wander in to a dive bar, and after everyone's turned around to glare, they go back to some sort of high stakes card game? This is it. Sort of.

Players set up a huge board, lay out and randomise some planets, and pick whichever corner they're heading out from, plonking down their ships (a big slow one and couple of quicker ones). They pick a deck of cards for their crew, take a handful of the chips (nice weighted, mini-poker ones – not American snacks) and they're away. On each players turn they spend three action points to move their ships through the solar system, handing on planets to plunder them, visiting dive bars to refill their hands, and playing crew

cards when appropriate. The goal of this phase is to get resources and get them to the centre of the board which is a kind of warp point that brings your ships home and nets you the resources you were carrying. There are a few cool wrinkles to this phase, such as playing crew cards from your hand to alter the board state, steal resources, move a bit faster. At the end of the round, when the planets move, if you're orbiting you'll travel with them. There's a system where you can drop 'bridges' that allow your ships to bounce on to the next hex, which is quite satisfying.

And then you play poker. Yes, all of the cool little tweaks and twists in the game are about getting you to play a single round of poker. The resources you collected over the last ten minutes in the previous phase are just to create some poker chips. I think poker (it's Texas hold'em for those interested) is good fun, but it does feel a bit anticlimactic to do 'cool space navigation' to then just be dealt a dud hand and not really be able to do anything cool with it. The crew cards spice things up a bit – making for interesting hands to be played, and the enigmata cards can change the gameplay going forward, when they come out (which is rare).

The production is great (there's a lot of chips in here), the cards feel very good. But the whole thing falls flat. It's simply unsatisfying to do a lot of mucking about to play one hand of poker. Had this been a smaller (and less pricey) box, and was mostly about playing poker with a twist, then there might be something there, but everything in this game becomes a slog where it should be a series of high-stakes choices. One of those who need an excuse to buy some poker chips only.

**CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT**



### PLAY IT? MAYBE

If you've been looking for an elaborate excuse to play poker – or just to get hold of some poker style chips – then *Antematter* might work for you. For the rest it's probably best to look elsewhere.



### WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game board
- ▶ Poker deck
- ▶ 6 Planet 'minis'
- ▶ 30 Cargo cubes
- ▶ Dealer/Cycle marker (a d4)
- ▶ Deck of enigmata cards (15 cards)
- ▶ 200 Weighted chips
- ▶ 12 Dive bar and respect tokens
- ▶ 6 Crew decks (25 cards each)
- ▶ 6 Roc miniatures
- ▶ 12 Raven miniatures
- ▶ 24 Bridge miniatures

### TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED POKER...

It's a bit of a cheat, as this game is just fancy poker, but it might give other players around.







# RATTUS BIG BOX

The big bulging box of black death

Designer: Asa & Henrik Berg | Publisher: Z-Man Games

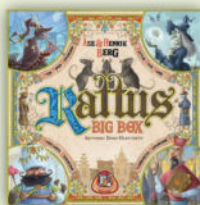


It's always nice to see a great older game get the big box treatment and while *Rattus* may not have been an obvious candidate for it, this certainly came as a welcome surprise. Originally released in 2010, the game was embellished with more than 10 expansions, bonus card sets and promos, before finally going dark in 2018. But here we are five years on and its back once again.

Basic *Rattus* is an accessible, fast-playing area majority game. Each player has 20 citizens that they're trying to get onto the board, which will trigger the end of the game. On a turn you'll first add citizens to the board and (optionally) take one of the six character cards in play. You place as many citizens as the area you choose (up to three) in the area you take, so placing more out immediately puts them in more danger.

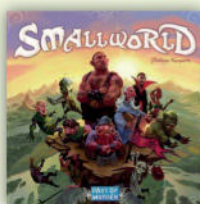
Next you'll move the plague piece to an area adjoining the one it was in last turn, placing a number of new rat tokens into areas adjoining the one it arrives in. If there aren't enough rat tokens left to fulfil this, that will also end that game. Finally, you resolve the plague, flipping over rat tokens in the area containing the plague piece if there are any citizens there.

Rat tokens have a minimum citizen number that will make the token



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Main game board
- ▶ 2 Small expansion boards
- ▶ 47 Wooden pieces
- ▶ 150+ Cardboard tiles and tokens
- ▶ 33 Oversized character cards
- ▶ 68 Region cards
- ▶ 30 Small event cards



trigger (otherwise it is discarded), plus symbols indicating who will be killed if it activates. This can be all players with a citizen there, the person with the majority in the area, or players holding character cards with specific symbols.

It's these character cards that really elevate the game's tactical play. You can always take any one of them on your turn, either from stock or another player. But, once you have them, they'll stay with you unless another player takes them away. Having many characters makes the likelihood of being devastated by the plague higher, but each also gives a powerful special ability.

Examples include the King, who allows you to move a citizen to a safe haven each round (each guaranteeing you a point), the Peasant lets you put out an extra citizen, while the Monk and Merchant allow you to move rat tokens and citizens (respectively) to different regions.

When the game ends, some players will get a final use of their character cards and then all remaining rat tokens on the board are resolved. After this oft-comical carnage, the player with the most citizens left on

the board wins.

The main *Rattus* board scales nicely, with more areas available at higher player counts. That said, the sweet spot is definitely three to four players. Two can be fun but is also a little zero-sum, while five and six feels like there's too much downtime for a lot of players.

The *Rattus* Bog Box contains the original base game, three old expansions in their entirety (Pied Piper, Africanus, and Academius), a few extra older bonus cards, plus the brand-new Guilds and Inns module. That makes for more than 30 Character cards and lots of option extras you can include in each game and including pretty much everything fans of the game rate the highest.

While this is certainly a big box, purchasers wanting to replace the original should note it doesn't include everything. Some of the smaller expansions are missing, along with many character cards including Marco Polo, Genghis Khan, and Robin Hood. But the slightly daft Jester is in here, so there are a few nice little surprises.

The new Guilds and Inns module is a nice addition, adding two new character cards each of which comes with its own mini board. Taking one of these characters allows you to then put one of your citizens from your stock onto its corresponding board, either opening up new actions or helping add more citizens to specific areas, while also being worth some bonus points at the end of the game for the player with the majority on each board.

If you like a lighter area majority game, *Rattus* is worthy of your time. This big box version offers a huge amount of replayability, as well as scaling from family/gateway game to more thinky euro in the process. It is well produced, with a clear and concise rulebook. It only lacks a few player aids, but how often do we say that? ●

CHRIS MARLING

PLAY IT? YES

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED SMALL WORLD

Lighter area majority games such as *Bunny Kingdom* or *Small World* will give you a similar buzz for your buck.





# GARDEN NATION

## Putting down some roots

Designer: Rémi Saunier & Nathalie Saunier | Publisher: Bombyx



In *Garden Nation*, the four magical fairy and gnome folk are vying for control of the garden. They don't do this by waging war with one another but instead by using everyday objects such as coffee pots and bird feeds to build beautiful towers. Players, who for this game get to imagine themselves as a chief architect of their selected tribe, have seven randomly arranged garden terrains to build on and a starting population of their fellow fairy folk who are eager to inhabit their new homes.

The players' primary goal throughout the game would be to construct buildings in certain arrangements or on the terrains that are specified on the common project cards, on their private secret missions that are only revealed at the end of the game. Each piece of the building will require a certain number of inhabitants, so, from time to time, players may need to abandon an already constructed building (typically those they have scored previously) to get some of them back. This makes the population of inhabitants an interesting resource throughout the game. You never spend or lose it, as whatever you used to build in the first place, you can get back when you demolish the building. The trick here is to balance when to build and when to demolish. Although a building that was previously used to score a project (you can tell which ones they are because they get the adorable leaf-shaped

roofs) can't be used to complete any other projects, by removing them from play you could be potentially giving up a valuable plot in the garden that your opponents would be only too happy to snap.

The base actions throughout the game are simple, repetitive even: build, demolish or score, repeat. However, behind these moves, there is some crunchy strategic thinking. There is no standard turn order. The first player decides who goes after them. It is a powerful ability, which is why they only get one action, while the other players get two. Also, a sector where you perform an action determines the location of the next action (which is tracked using an adorable torticrane miniature). It is not unusual to use your first action be

a setup for where you really want to go on your next turn. Or use it to control what your opponent must do on their turn. This is not restrictive enough to completely scramble someone's plans, but it could be successful in slowing them down and allowing you to score a common project first, for example.

While the gameplay tries to focus the players' attention on the area control elements of the game or occupy players with the busy work of completing the projects, the most interesting part is being able to control someone else's next action. This can lead to some intriguing dilemmas: do you do something that is best for you but potentially also good for the next player, or perform an action that is averagely good but puts the next player in a pickle? Other



elements of the game - building towers, making patterns and scoring points - that's

something that many games have done before, but having the power to not only choose who goes next but also where they will go, feels intriguing, even a little devious. ●

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

### PLAY IT? MAYBE

By focusing on area control by the way of pattern making, *Garden Nation* doesn't fully capitalise on its strongest idea that controlling what the player does next is the most powerful action.



### WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 12 Tiles
- ▶ 45 Objective cards
- ▶ 80 Building floor modules
- ▶ 19 Roofs
- ▶ 1 Torticrane
- ▶ 4 Personal player boards
- ▶ 9 Bramble tokens
- ▶ 16 Play tokens
- ▶ 4 Additional inhabitants tokens
- ▶ 4 70 Victory point tokens
- ▶ 4 Population tokens
- ▶ 4 Player tokens
- ▶ 4 Score tokens

### TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TAKENOKO

The central mechanic of *Garden Nation* - building towers in specific arrangements - is reminiscent of growing bamboo arrangements (and then scoring them) in *Takenoko*. At least in *Garden Nation* you get to decide when you demolish your building and you don't have to worry that a hungry panda will come and eat your creation.





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# FORESTS OF PANGAIA

A topper above the rest

Designer: Thomas Franken | Publisher: Pangaia Games



Some board games have a strong table presence, *Forests of Pangaia* makes a table statement. It's not necessarily a moralising one but having played this game composed of beautiful sustainably sourced stackable wooden trees, it is hard not to leave the table in awe of the beauty of the forests and thinking of just how much human intervention disrupts the natural dance of growth and decay.

The gameplay strongly links into that tree growth cycle and adds a little bit of magic to it. As players, you control the forest spirits, fantastical creatures that travel around the gridded terrain of four biomes, represented by snow, wind, sun and rain, to plant seeds. Through the subsequent rounds of the game, these seeds would come to grow into trees, which can also get taller with the addition of stackable wooden toppers. Each player continues to move their spirit around the board, planting seeds, extending trees and collecting resources from the four biomes until they feel that the forest has grown big enough to perform one of the three types of rituals.

Rituals are depicted on the cards (each of which shows a beautifully illustrated landscape) and will award

victory points (life energy) based on the position of the trees, specific biomes and other surrounding trees, including those of the opponent. In *Forests of Pangaia*, players can't really block or sabotage each other. While the game is competitive, every change to the board, whether that's planting new seeds or growing trees, is complementary, adding to the overall environment for the benefit of all. The most confrontational part of the game is the area control mechanisms that is involved in growing seeds when two players are hoping to grow a tree in the same spot. Typically, the player with the most seeds wins, although adjacent trees, spirits and even spending some of your life energy tokens can swing the balance in another player's favour. Yet even this part doesn't feel too adversarial: unused seeds are returned to their owners and there are plenty of other spots to plant them. *Forests of Pangaia* doesn't focus on players facing off against each other, favouring well-planned timing and good pattern spotting instead.

This is also a very family-friendly game with rules easy to pick up and explain. Players can add layers of complexity to the game by playing with achievement cards that reward for certain milestones, for example having

the tallest tree at the end of the game. Or, if players want to be able to set up more combos, they can add blessing cards, which offer extra actions but will also cost additional resources.

Even with various additions, the trees are always the central part of the game. They come in a warm gentle palette of yellows, oranges and greens, creating a feeling of a warm sunny day in autumn. The game doesn't have too many components, but each of them, from the seed meeples to the gorgeous card illustrations, have been throughout and designed to the minute detail, creating so much visual richness and a feast for the eyes. The visual impact of the game, its table presence, and the tactility of the simple action of stacking tree toppers are all closely interlinked with the core gameplay creating a holistic experience. *Forests of Pangaia* may seem simple in gameplay and in theme, but the source of its magic is in the perfect execution of its vision. **ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA**

## PLAY IT? YES

In *Forests of Pangaia*, the theme and the gameplay perfectly coalesce to create a beautiful game for the whole family that will leave a long-lasting impression.



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 16 Land tiles
- ▶ 24 Treetops
- ▶ 40 Trees
- ▶ 4 Player boards
- ▶ 4 Cloth bags
- ▶ 48 Life tokens
- ▶ 16 Seeds
- ▶ 4 Spirit meeples
- ▶ 48 Resource tokens
- ▶ 18 Ritual cards
- ▶ 10 Achievement cards
- ▶ 22 Blessing cards
- ▶ 10 Player aid cards
- ▶ 9 Weather cards
- ▶ 4 Corruption tokens

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED PHOTOSYNTHESIS

Both games showcase the beauty of forests, but *Forests of Pangaia* takes its representation of trees to the next level.







# HORSELESS CARRIAGE

The most original game you'll play this year

**Designer:** Jeroen Doumen & Joris Wiersinga | **Publisher:** Splotter Spellen



**W**hat are these things? For a relatively small industry concerned with the creation of something that is solely for recreational purposes there is a lot of debate swirling around. Sure, some of it is mired in the culture war morass, accusations of immorality and unseemliness but, I'm incredibly happy to say, most of it is about the substance of these things. Games. So, with no regard for being repetitive I ask again, what are these things?

Do games exist solely in the mind? Are the bits and the board just ways of tracking the abstract and intangible thought impulses of the designers? A reminder of our station

in the journey we're being taken on? Are games engineering without a machine? The only identifiable motion that the mechanisms create, the electrical impulses between synapses that compelled us to stick that meeple *there*. It's a satisfyingly poncey conclusion to draw but it doesn't feel right.

Games exist in space. Something must be given over to the components that make up the game. It is not good enough to just say that games give us an excuse to be around the table with others. That is a part of it but there is an intrinsic, haptic crackle when you place a lifeless piece of wood on a lifeless piece of cardboard. For that moment

they are imbued with the electricity of our brain. For that moment games live. Not just as abstract concepts but as living objects humming with the life we've given them.

More and more I see people who care about these things. Who talk about these things. Who want a collected lexicon for games. Two people who couldn't care less about these considerations though are Jeroen Doumen and Joris Wiersinga, the beautiful and diabolical minds behind *Horseless Carriage*.

Their thoughts aren't bent on the platonic ideal of what a game is, all they want to do is make games that are wholly unique and that feel like





nothing you've ever played. *Horseless Carriage* does exactly that and simply by cleaving to their own idiosyncratic ideals they have created a game that is closer to perfect, in ludological terms, than anything I've played in ages.

On top of that they perfectly perform that board gaming alchemy of taking a painfully dull subject and making it the most interesting thing in the world for a couple of hours.

I've never wanted to be a factory manager. I have zero logistical skills but for the time I'm building my factory in *Horseless Carriage* I couldn't be more fascinated by line structure and efficient floor plans. If you can make someone like *me* interested in that, you've really done your job.

Like most Spotter titles the game is divided into phases where the plans you have devised early in the round are resolved in the later phases. In the early phase you place components onto your factory floor

making sure that they are oriented in such a way that your line will run. These components are of various sizes and placing them in the correct way to ensure you don't take up all of your floor space is mind bending but incredibly rewarding if you get it right. These components will give your cars certain attributes that your marketing department can sell to the public to make them loyal customers. When you have built all that, you can in your factory with the confinement of space and technological limitations you then have to sell the cars you've built. This is simulated using plastic sales windows that cover areas of the market board to simulate your reach. If your clients fall within these windows and your cars have the right specifications you can sell to them and it is money that will win you the game.

I often find myself with my nose in a rulebook flummoxed at how the game will play. The written word is wholly inadequate to convey the experience of a game. This is doubly true for Spotter games. Their rules often read as wilfully simple and prosaic but when you get the engine running you realise why they have such a rabid fanbase and such staunch defenders.

They need defenders too. Their aesthetic could be charitably called *basic* and in this modern age of technicolour this seems to be an unforgivable sin with many condemning them based on the look of their games alone. *Horseless Carriage* is no exception but with a game this good the bland greys and pale blues sublime into the joy of manipulating the mechanisms and you become so submerged in the sheer originality and audaciousness of them that the look doesn't matter a jot.

There is so much strategic and tactical depth here. How your overall plan will affect you from your first placement. Your reactions to the variable turn order and the technological advancements made by other players. This is a game that will leave you knock kneed and foggy headed by the end and that is why it's so good.

Unlike so many heavy games though, *Horseless Carriage* isn't hard to learn. After one round you know what the rules are. Try being good at

it though. That is where the challenge should lie in games. Not in the parsing of a hundred little exceptions.

There is no doubt in my mind that this game is a masterpiece but like all shockingly brilliant works of art it is sure to be divisive. Some may think it too long. Others may say it's too involved. Some may simply refuse to engage with a game that looks so dull but every time Spotter releases something it is worth investigating and while I haven't got along with some of their games, *Horseless Carriage* and I have formed a firm friendship.

It is unforgiving, it shares this with many of their previous titles. A false move in the first phase of the first turn can ensure you can't win. This is, understandably, off putting for some and the lack of concession to those unfamiliar with the game can seem unfair but their steadfastness in their design ideals is what makes the Spotter boys as good as they are. Not every game has to pat you on the back.

Also it's long. You won't get a game in under three hours. If you can't face that intenseness of thought for that length of time you should probably avoid it.

Those minor quibbles aside, you cannot escape from the fact that *Horseless Carriage* will be the most original game you'll play this year and, maybe, for many years to come. Spotter truly push the limits of what games are and live entirely outside the sphere of hobby gaming. They are the closest that this industry has to Art Brut.

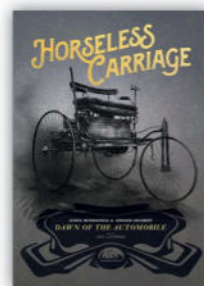
Unlike most outsider artists though, their works aren't merely curiosities. They are fully formed concepts that deliver what they intend to, a transformative gaming experience.

What are these things? These aren't the type of questions that are meant to be answered. They are here to promote discussion and the world would be a lot paler if there were an answer but if there was an answer, a definitive box that we could put on a plinth and say, "that's a game" I would hope it would be something like *Horseless Carriage*. ●

**BEN MADDOX**

#### PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY

Spotter's voice is so unique within this hobby that, even if you bounce hard off this game, it is worth playing.



#### WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Market board
- ▶ 2 Specs axes
- ▶ 5 Research tracks
- ▶ 5 Minimum spec indicators
- ▶ Obsolescence marker
- ▶ Various car meeples in three types
- ▶ 50 Brand markers
- ▶ Various factory tiles
- ▶ Various mainline tiles
- ▶ 3 Dealerships per player
- ▶ Various planning, marketing and research tiles
- ▶ Various technology station tiles
- ▶ 9 Market window tokens
- ▶ Various spark markers
- ▶ 5 Player market growth decks
- ▶ Neutral market growth deck

#### TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED FOOD CHAIN MAGNATE

Much like this other Spotter classic, *Horseless Carriage* is full of meanness and challenge and an uncompromising act of singular vision.





# LET'S CALL THE EXORCIST

Are you possessed? Or have you... forgotten, for some reason?

**Designer:** Cory Jones, Ben Stoll, Mataio Wilson | **Publisher:** Cryptozoic Entertainment



**H**idden role games are experiencing a little extra limelight recently, with the popularity of *Blood on the Clocktower* driving much of the hype. Unfortunately, just hiding one's role from other players – or even yourself – doesn't necessarily guarantee a good game.

*Let's Call The Exorcist* takes its theme from the Satanic Panic era of the 80s and 90s, with lo-fi cartoon imagery that nods to the era's early dungeon RPG illustration. The point tokens are tiny little communion wafers, a cute touch. Cryptozoic have released two volumes of games in partnership with illustrator Stephen Rhodes, all sharing a similar retro paintjob.

The basic concept underlying the game is this: Daddy has returned from some sort of archaeological excavation, and accidentally brought home cursed artifacts that have possessed the children. Some of the children, anyway. It's a fun, silly idea that takes itself exactly as seriously as the rest of the game does. I.e. not at all.

Players are given a secret token that identifies them as "Innocent" or "Possessed". At the beginning of the game you are allowed to look at your token; but thereafter only allowed to peek again if given the power to do so by a card's action. Cards have the abilities such as switching other player's identity tokens, looking at them, or gaining extra points.

Through the course of each round – broken down into sets of deals – the aim is for the Innocent players to reveal all the Holy Artifacts before all the Cursed Artifacts make an appearance. If the Possessed players can expose the Curses to the world, well, the entire family is a goner.

What little strategy within is based on pretending to be good, or bad, and trying to trick the players into selecting the opposite action from the one they should otherwise take. All players have to explain what

## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 5 Innocent tiles
- ▶ 3 Possessed tiles
- ▶ 9 Holy artifacts cards
- ▶ 4 Cursed artifacts cards
- ▶ 24 Mischiefs cards
- ▶ 6 Blessings cards
- ▶ 45 Point tokens



is in their hand of cards, giving an estimate of what card is likely to come out randomly. It's easy to be caught out in a lie, and often there will be significantly more Holy Artifacts declared by players than actually exist in the game.

Unfortunately, *Let's Call The Exorcist* fails due to its looseness of player identity. The humour of trying to recruit more actors to the side of darkness, only to discover that you've been switched to the Innocent role without knowing? Well, that wears thin pretty quickly. You are left with a game where everyone acts randomly, and lies without consequence. Robbing players of interesting decisions is rarely a recipe for success.

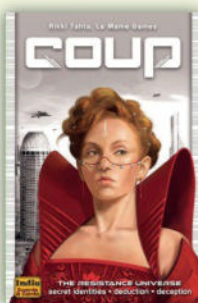
I've played it at both extremes

of player count, neither of which particularly excelled. With four players, there is a 50/50 chance of being Possessed or Innocent; once the randomness of exchanges occurs, the game doesn't leave you with any confidence that weeding out the Possessed is possible. At eight players, that ratio is 38%/62%, which does make social deduction potentially achievable. Unfortunately, the lengthened play time with so many extra rounds doesn't merit the limited fun pay-off. ●

**CHRIS LOWRY**

## PLAY IT? NO

Hidden Identity thrives in tension and deception. *Let's Call The Exorcist* has too little dramatic consequence to be worth the investment.



## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED COUP

...*Coup* perfectly fosters the collective deceit so important to the genre, and if you prefer the humour of not actually knowing your role, you can absolutely play without looking at your cards.





# CRIME SCENE: LONDON 1892

Story time for grown ups

Designer: Richard Heayes | Publisher: Tactic



Next time you pay a visit to The Range, try to tear yourself away from the prospect of a new lightbulb, toilet brush, or competitively priced sofa, and instead divert your attention to the games section: You might be surprised. Sure, there's no shortage of typical family fare here, but the home, leisure, and garden superstore has also started distributing titles from Finnish publisher Tactic Games. Elsewhere in this issue you'll find Tactic's light and strategic *Land of Clans*, but right now we'll be taking a look at *London 1892*; one of several games from their *Crime Scene* series.

Designed by Richard Heayes with writing by Arttu Tuominen, *London 1892* is a narrative, mystery/puzzle game: Think *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* crossed with the *EXIT* games. Together, players assume the role of a detective tasked with solving a violent crime; in this case, the murder of a young woman in a grim, Whitechapel alleyway.

Set four years after the notorious 'Jack the Ripper' murders, part one of

*London 1892*'s story booklet suggests an unexpected protraction of the killer's list of victims. Certainly the immediate evidence points toward this, but it will be up to the players to assess the crime-scene and decipher puzzles to finally unpick the truth.

Puzzles flick between scouring the crime-scene image for objects – *Where's Wally* style – and pondering over evidence cards for patterns and number-based conundrums. Solving a puzzle will result in series of three numbers corresponding to a paragraph, line, and then word from the story. Unless a mistake has been made (penalised by the removal of 'reputation' cards), this word will direct players' investigative skills back to the crime-scene image, and the process repeats.

It's a pleasing gameplay loop, and – as long as players don't get too tied up on particular puzzles – an enjoyable way of experiencing a short story. It also helps that the story is generally well written, with touches of evocative language confidently conjuring the

murky London underworld, and subjecting readers to some surprisingly grisly (don't play this with kids!) snippets of dialogue and imagery. There's the odd typo here and there, but overall Tactic's decision to utilise established (and in this case, award winning) authors for their *Crime Scene* games seems to have paid off.

In terms of presentation, *London: 1892* is a mixed bag. Card quality is ok, but the rulebook suffers from some clarity and layout issues, and the crime-scene image is perhaps a touch too dark and hazy. On the other hand, the gradual process of arranging cards into a table-hogging evidence board – complete with pins and string – is satisfying.

With narrative being such a core part of *London 1892*, it seems important that the puzzles here never become punishing to the point of interrupting the game's pace. If players do get stuck, hint cards can be used, although, in our opinion, they seem to unveil a bit too much of the solution. After committing to a puzzle's answer, the associated 'crime file' card will determine players' success, but, somewhat clumsily, also lists three more numerical solutions. A failed attempt, therefore, gives players the strange opportunity to work backwards from the solution. This may not be the intent of the design, but it nonetheless makes for a less punishing experience and minimises the likelihood of becoming completely stumped.

*London 1892*'s design may not be as smooth as some of its contemporaries, and it's puzzles can certainly feel like a bit jarring thematically (I'm looking at you bread ovens), but the overall experience is enjoyable. At the very least, *London 1892* has piqued my interest in investigating some of the other titles in the *Crime Scene* series. ●

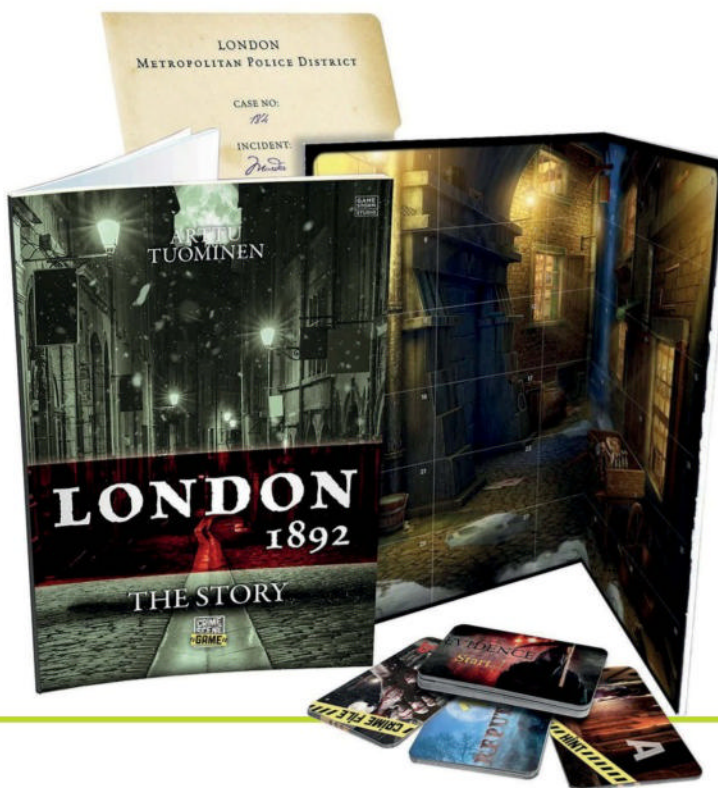
## PLAY IT? YES

A well-paced puzzle wrapped up in an engaging short story.



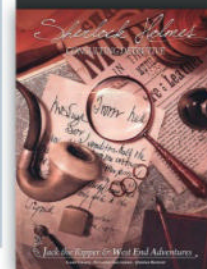
### WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Crime scene image
- Story booklet
- Game guide
- 64 Cards



### TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED: SHERLOCK HOLMES: JACK THE RIPPER AND WEST END ADVENTURES

A swifter route into Whitehall's bleak underbelly.







# FULLMETAL ALCHEMIST: BROTHERHOOD – THE PROMISED DAY

Pointless filler arc

Designer: Nao Shimamura | Publisher: Square Enix



**W**hy do you keep doing this to me, anime tie-in games? Why do you continue to raise my expectations and feed into my memories of these shows only to leave me swearing and disheartened? I swore again whilst writing this review after learning how much this game costs.

*Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood – The Promised Day* (what a mouthful) is a co-operative game for 1-4 players set during the epic finale of the show, so if you haven't watched it but ever want to (it is genuinely one of the best animes ever made) there's no quicker way to spoil major plot twists than playing this game.

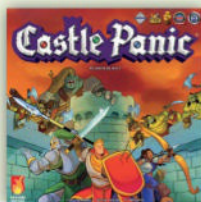
Each of the game's seven rounds start with a new event or boss being revealed, causing an outpour of enemies to spill out from the centre or a new dastardly villain to dash your plans of success. Once you've endured your beatings and have time to access the damage, each player takes a turn moving then performing actions. These actions revolve around playing cards from your hand to deal a certain amount of damage to enemies with a set range (e.g. a range 1 card can hit anything around your character or within one space, with damage split as you choose.) These cards will also be one of four different colours, with specific placement being the key to success.

Each of the game's five sections will



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 2 Game boards
- ▶ 5 Cardboard circle tiles
- ▶ 6 Character summary cards
- ▶ 5 Boss tiles
- ▶ 147 Game cards
- ▶ 46 Cardboard tokens
- ▶ 9 Wooden tokens
- ▶ 6 Cardboard character stands



have a part of the dreaded "Bad Guy Plan Circle." To remove the part and get one step closer to victory, players work together to meet a set requirement of cards placed in that zone. For example, one area may require that at least one card of each colour is played in this section, then transmuted as another action (which some characters will not have access to.) Of course, sometimes you won't be able to play the cards where you want; the key to winning is finding the right balance between playing cards to deal with threats and playing them in places to resolve the transmutation action.

Except it isn't. Because whilst that might be what the game *wants* to do, it's just too random to guarantee that, so it's less about strategic planning and more "did I draw a red card? No? Guess we lose."

The entire strategy revolves around players drawing cards, but you draw cards VERY slowly, each one costing you a precious action point, of which you only get two of in a four-player game, so if you didn't draw anything you can play right there and then, your turn was spent half refilling a hand and contributing nothing to winning. Sure,

you can get cards from bonuses and some characters have extra ways to draw, but by and large your chances of winning and losing are dictated by your opening hand instead of how you use it.

The game even does a cute thing where the alchemist characters can fuse some of their cards together (assuming they draw them of course) but because it means placing two cards down in the same space, often you're torn between doing something fun and doing something to win the game. These should not be mutually exclusive.

I'm sorry to mention it again, but also the price. The worst thing an expensive product can do is feel cheap and this muddy colour palette, cluttered rulebook and clunky mechanics do not feel like a luxury title, when you can get so many better games at half the price of this one. I genuinely cannot recommend this game, it's too costly and too random to be worth your time. 📉

MATTHEW VERNALL

## PLAY IT? NO

Unless you are a diehard fan of this franchise who's happy to spend a fortune in time and money, do not summon this game into your life.

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED: CASTLE PANIC

Both games have you attempting to topple a seemingly never-ending horde of baddies with a strong focus on protecting a perimeter. If you've played *Castle Panic* to death and really love this show, seek this out on a "try before you buy" basis.





# JIANGNAN: LIFE OF GENTRY

Oi! Who arted?

Designer: DuGuWei | Publisher: Moaideas



90-120m



1-4



14+



£80

It's 16<sup>th</sup> Century Ming Dynasty China and vases are kicking off. Boy, do folks love their decorative receptacles. But it's not just porcelain and ceramics that are having a cultural moment. Chinese literature is exploding, with sprawling adventurous epics like *Journey to the West* and *The Water Margin* reaching a wide audience, there's a surge of plays, scholars are writing about their travels round the country and artists are painting bold new works. If you can ride the tides of fickle public opinion, there's clout and cash aplenty, waiting to be trousered.

Players take the role of members of the creative gentry, toiling over great works in their studios while staving off the ever-present threat of ennui. Each turn you'll place one of your three scholar pawns on one of the six possible locations, maybe wandering out into society to get some inspiration for a new play, perhaps visiting the pub to publish your next magnum opus or find out what kinds of art everyone else is excited about, or maybe leaving the city to travelling to other parts of the region to expand your mind.

Well, you're sort of doing these actions, though thematically much of the time you're actually sending one of your legion of servants to do it for you. You don't get the choice to go just anywhere, either – you'll draw tokens from a bag and choose one of them, then you get to visit the spot with the matching symbol.

Scoring in *Jiangnan* isn't a point salad so much as a blizzard of whirling options and opportunities. You can get victory points for publishing works of art, some immediately, some as a form of income at the beginning of each round – as you release new chapters of your novel – you might get victory points for inviting an alluring muse back to your studio, there are incidental victory points for taking certain actions, then there's the actual scoring phases at the end of every other round.



Running along the bottom of the board is a river, full of boats. At the end of each round, for every scholar you've placed in a location, you put a servant onto the corresponding boat below. Then all the boats drift to the right. When a boat reaches the end of the line, whoever has the most servants in it gets to choose which of the two symbols depicted in the boat players will score on. So maybe there's a choice between number of muses in your studio and number of far-off destinations you've travelled to. This means that the actions you take in the game only matter if the fashions of the day care about them – so as well as trying to be a great artist you're trying to anticipate public opinion – or even manipulate it – to make sure you're on trend.

If this all sounds complicated, it is. This is a cliché of heavy euros, but once you get your head round the mechanics, things flow, if not intuitively, certainly with a lot more grace and purpose. The rulebook is pretty dreadful, the lack of clarity not helped by omissions and flat-out errors – a real problem when you

are presenting multiple 'chapters' representing game modes of increasing complexity.

It's a shame because, while *Jiangnan* contains nothing revelatory, a lot of it is pretty cool. It drips, oozes, fairly cascades with theme – at the end of each round, you lose 'spirit' based on how many unfinished works you have in your studio, and the number of muses you have hanging around stressing you out with your intrigue. Hit zero on the track and you're overcome with the need for solitude and miss an action next round. The variable scoring and majority control in the boats feels fresh and interesting.

But the bag-building aspect – and especially the drafting of new action tokens – is time-consuming and feels weirdly inconsequential. This is a rich, textured title for sure, and the advanced rules increase the replayability, but it asks a lot in terms of initial investment, the rewards on offer not quite justifying its complexity. ●

TIM CLARE

PLAY IT? MAYBE

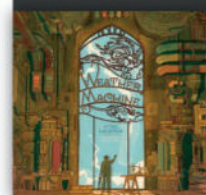


## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 20 Character tiles
- ▶ 3 District boards
- ▶ Upkeep board
- ▶ 4 River boards
- ▶ 6 Boat tiles
- ▶ 4 Player boards
- ▶ Final scoring overlay
- ▶ 12 Scholar markers
- ▶ 20 Player markers
- ▶ 100 Servant markers
- ▶ 45 Portfolio tiles
- ▶ 90 Idea tiles
- ▶ 100 Coin tokens
- ▶ 48 Starting action tiles
- ▶ 54 Basic action tiles
- ▶ 24 Advanced action tiles
- ▶ 15 Display tiles
- ▶ 15 Public scoring trend tiles
- ▶ 12 Scoring goal tiles
- ▶ 5 Draw bags
- ▶ Muse stack cover tile
- ▶ 6 Shop tiles
- ▶ 2 Special action pointer tiles
- ▶ 6 Spirits tiles
- ▶ 6 Blocking tiles
- ▶ 6 Charm tiles
- ▶ 4 Imperial decree tiles
- ▶ 4 Player aids
- ▶ Rulebook

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED WEATHER MACHINE

If you are a fan of heavy, point-salad euros in the Vital Lacerda vein – things like *Weather Machine* – you'll find a lot to enjoy here, though *Jiangnan* is probably a touch lighter:







# NICODEMUS

Start your steampunk engines...

Designer: Bruno Cathala & Florian Sirieix | Publisher: Bombyx

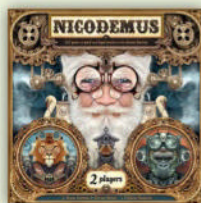


I expect many will be drawn toward *Nicodemus* thanks to the steampunk art style which harks directly back to previous Cathala/Sirieix game, *Imaginarium*. That received pretty average reviews on release back in 2018 but must've done well enough for publisher Bombyx to squeeze a few more shekels out of the franchise with a two-player version. Which brings us back to *Nicodemus*.

I'll waste no further time on the theme, as beyond the unusual steampunk art style it is non-existent in gameplay terms. You're either going to love or hate the style and it is worth noting the game is very nicely produced. But then it needs to be with a £35 price tag for a small box game, which seems faintly ridiculous when you look at what you get for your money.

*Imaginarium* players will be on familiar (if slightly simplified) ground here. As in the original game, players gather resources with which to purchase machines (cards) and attempt to fulfil projects (points tiles). Both machines and projects will score you points, with the game ending when a player reaches 20 (or the card stack depletes). This should take around 45 minutes, as accurately stated on the box.

*Nicodemus* is a little lighter than



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 56 Square cards
- ▶ 32 Cubes (8 wooden, 24 plastic)
- ▶ Board
- ▶ 20 Cardboard tiles

*Imaginarium* in terms of complexity, and much lighter on components. On a turn you will either play a card from your hand to the central board (you always draw up to five at the end of your turn) or pay for a card already on that board to score it. The board acts like a conveyor belt, with each new card added to the end.

There are three basic resources, plus another required to take cards that have been on the conveyor belt longer (you add one resource to each card up to the one you want to buy). There's also a finite number of each resource, with any you are unable to take from stock instead being taken from your opponent. Cards you've already collected are used to give a discount on future purchases while they are in the area in front of you too.

It is here the game rather subtly comes into its own. You need to keep an eye on both your opponent's cards and resources to be able to tell exactly what they can afford to purchase from the conveyor belt. Otherwise you risk playing a card to do an action that plays right into their plans.

When you take a card, it's great to get that discount on later cards. But

if you want to complete projects for bonus points, you must discard the cards needed to trigger it instead. Ordinarily you'd just keep collecting machines to get huge discounts, but the catch is that you can never have more than three active cards. Taking a fourth clears the previous three from in front of you, so deciding when to trigger the taking of projects can be the key to efficiency, and so success.

Actions on the cards are pretty uninspiring, but they get the job of collecting resources done in a variety of ways. There are a few take-that cards, but nothing too drastic. Most just allow you to collect resources you need while sometimes discarding cards from the conveyor belt. This can save your bacon, as you may be able to discard a card your opponent needs to win.

Unfortunately, the iconography in *Nicodemus* is terrible. It took me three games before I had most of the icons memorised. This is pretty unforgivable as there are only 16 different cards, many of which have very similar explanations. To make things worse, this is yet another game screaming out for a player aid. So, in your first few plays, expect to be swapping the rulebook between yourselves as you look up what are actually quite straightforward options.

Games tend to be tight affairs, as almost everything you do will score 1-3 points. This can create exciting endings, which is where watching your opponent really comes into play. However, how much agency you have in any given situation is less predictable. We found as many games ended in anti-climax, as one player couldn't do anything to stop the other crawling over the line. 🍌

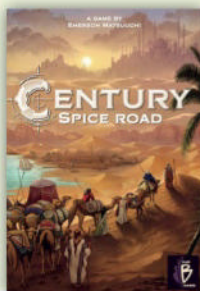
CHRIS MARLING

## PLAY IT? MAYBE

In the end, *Nicodemus* just didn't have enough to rise above the already strong pool of two-player euro-style games out there. Everything works, and the build-it-up-to-knock-it-down-again engine system certainly has its charms. But you have to ask yourself, once it goes on the shelf, will it ever come down again for a play? Ultimately for us, the answer was not often.

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED CENTURY: SPICE ROAD

If you're looking for a lightweight Euro with a cool art style, this might be worth a look.











**WHAT'S IN THE BOX?**

▶ 120 Illustrated Cards

**TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED PATIENCE**

The Playing Card Version of Patience. You'll feel right at home with the rules.

STRATEGY GAMES

WARGAMES

CARD GAMES

FAMILY GAMES

ROLEPLAYING GAMES

# KINGSBRIDGE THE GAME

Ken thinks all you need is a little Patience...

**Designer:** Wolfgang Kramer | **Publisher:** Thames & Kosmos



Ken Follett has an interesting relationship with board games. Where most authors are looking for that celluloid version of their penned events with actors and special effects and hopefully a run of sequels. Mr. Follett seems to have a small cottage industry running alongside his efforts, adapting his stories from very thin pressed and printed trees, to slightly thicker pressed and printed trees. I personally enjoyed playing the worker placement game *Pillars of the Earth* and so when I heard about *Kingsbridge* becoming available from Kosmos Games, then I was very interested to see what they were offering.

Where *Pillars of the Earth* was a striking but straightforward worker placement game where you built the main cathedral structure in the game, *Kingsbridge* is much more scaled back in terms of its ambition and mechanics. In fact *Kingsbridge* is so scaled back you might spend a couple of minutes looking for the rest of the game and the rest of the rulebook. At its core, *Kingsbridge* shares its mechanics with Solitaire, where you are using card manipulation and movement to create runs of thirteen cards that can then be removed from the game. The winner of the game is the first to play all of their deck, regardless of the number of runs they have personally created.

You'll be playing your cards into a playing area of six columns of cards, which at the beginning of the game will be filled with a single random card. You'll play your turn from a hand of six cards and on your turn you'll be doing a mixture of playing cards from your hand or moving batches of cards from one column to another in order to build up as many runs as possible in order to discard them. Once you can no longer play a card or manipulate the columns to make further progress, play will pass to the next player.

Once you're familiar with the game, you can introduce variable character power cards, which once per turn you can play in order to allow you to break the core mechanics of the game and allow you to do everything from starting extra columns to missing out numbers as you play. It adds an additional complexity to proceedings and certainly helps with how often you are likely to bring *Kingsbridge* back to the table.

This is a game that the fans of the book 'The Evening and The Morning' are going to appreciate. When you complete a run of 13 cards, then reading them in numerical order will provide small snippets of what occurs chronologically in the book, and there is some really pretty artwork and graphic design going on here. The special power cards each come

illustrated with a character from the book and they add an additional charm to the overall look and feel of the game. Overall when *Kingsbridge* is sitting on the table in front of you, there's a lot of effort going on here to make sure the theme has been represented enough to gloss over some very basic core mechanics.

What makes *Kingsbridge* work though is those core mechanics. It is very easy to not only introduce a player to this game, but you can have them learning and playing the game within minutes. Apart from some occasional clarification on the character powers, *Kingsbridge* is the kind of game that you set up, play and have a chin wag while you do it. It's a relaxed affair without the need to learn hugely complex strategies in order to win. To be perfectly honest, when I was playing it I didn't really care too much who was likely to win. You would define it as something light, fun and casual and if you're a fan of Ken Follett's work as well, then you're going to appreciate *Kingsbridge* even more. ●

**RICHARD SIMPSON**

## PLAY IT? YES

Designed to be something enjoyed over a lazy Sunday, easy to learn and play, with references fans of the series are going to appreciate.





# VOTES FOR WOMEN

It gets our vote

Designer: Tony Brown | Publisher: Fort Circle Games

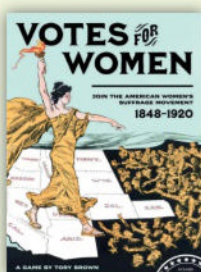


**W**omen, a novel concept, but one that has been taken too far?

This is one of the positions that you are (sort of) asked to take as one of the factions in this battle for the right to vote for the fairer sex. *Votes For Women* is a cube-shuffling war game that swaps the usual 'kill the cubes, control the area' for a metaphor of influencing each US state house to ratify the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment.

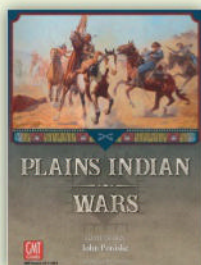
This is a historical game, but not one that demands reading ahead, and one that is pitched for a more mass-market audience. The history pamphlet is slim, but there's a bushel of historical props – facsimiles of real documents of the time – in the box that make engaging with the history easy and the information digestible. Everything in this box is beautifully made, right down to the little wooden ticks and crosses that will mark whether a state has votes for or against the amendment.

This is a card-driven game in which player either play their cards for the event on them, discard or for another action such as rolling a dice



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 170 Cards
- ▶ 250 Wooden pieces
- ▶ 21 Dice
- ▶ 18 Campaign buttons
- ▶ Map board
- ▶ 11 Replicas of historical documents



to add more supporters to the board, adding or removing columns from the congress track or gaining the currency of the game (propaganda badges and pins of course).

Throughout you'll be placing your propagandists (in two colours for the Suffragists and angry looking red men for the opposition) into regions of the US, each of these are broken into states which can be contested for with your influence cubes.

The goal of the Suffragists is to push the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment to congress by filling the congress track, as when this happens ratification begins across the states – meaning any side with four influence in the state secures that state for themselves. Winning means securing the super majority of states ratifying the amendment required (36), or blocking it if you're the opposition (13).

And it's a blast. Because the decks are stacked to match the flow

of history, the power level of each faction curves in a particular way. There is some dice rolling, but for quite slim ranges that can be off-set with strategic play. The push and pull within individual turns is tasty.

The only complaint is there isn't a guide to state short codes for those of us outside the US. We don't know if MI is Missouri, Minnesota, Mississippi, or Michigan. And this led to a bit of unnecessary googling, still, at least that's better than having to look up any of the rules.

So then, is this is the wargame to get everyone into shuffling little cubes around in the classic style? Yes, it is actually. And we think we could get a super-majority to back us on that.

**CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT**

## PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY

History buff or not, this is a cracking game that's going to light up your gaming evenings.

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED PLAINS INDIAN WARS...

While the theme for *Votes for Women* is much lighter than the slaughter and resistance of the native peoples of the same continent, the free-flowing back and forth of the game shares the same good time.

# TALKING TABLETOP VOTES FOR WOMEN

We talk to Tory Brown about the fight for suffrage on our tabletops



**Hello! Would you mind introducing yourself to our readers? Who are you and what are you known for?**

I am Tory Brown, the designer of *Votes for Women*. I am a first time game designer and in my day job I'm a political communications strategist for America's largest labour union. I believe deeply in the power of social movements to create a more just world and I'm inspired by stories of people who, with all their flaws and mistakes, still managed to make the world a better place.

**What was the inspiration for making the game? What was that initial spark?**

The first inkling for the game came when I read an article in 2019 about plans to celebrate the centennial of the 19th Amendment's passage. I knew the basics of suffrage movement story from a women's history course I took in college, and knew the narrative had awesome potential as a board game. The suffragists were scrappy and faced incredibly long odds, and over the course of 7 decades these activists reshaped American society, government, and the very definition of what it meant to be a woman. Who wouldn't want to tell that story?

**Mechanically it's got a war game at its heart – tell us about choosing this as the mechanic behind the metaphor?**

*Votes for Women* is a territorial control game on a map of 48 American states because that's what is required in Article 5 of the American

Constitution to pass an amendment in 1920. Players build power in the states (via wooden cubes) because social movements require organizers to build power in the states. It is a card-driven game because this forces tough decisions with limited resources just like political activists are forced to make. Also, my research into the people, events, and forces generated so much content (including the beautiful artwork, artifacts, and photos) that I needed multiple decks to include as much of it as possible. Essentially, the form of a war game followed the function of telling this story about a major conflict in American society. A non-violent, women-led, loooong conflict, but a conflict nonetheless.

**Tell us about the historical figures we're introducing – are there any stand out characters? How have you linked their actions to the world of the game?**

I intentionally created space for women that aren't often highlighted in popular tellings of the American suffrage story. So instead of an Elizabeth Cady Stanton card, you can play Lucy Stone, a suffragist who split from Stanton & Susan B Anthony over the 15th amendment (which is one key pivot point in the game.) Particularly effective organizers usually earn a button for the player. A lot of figures build power in their home regions, so Sojourner Truth builds power in the Midwest as does Frances Harper in the Mid-Atlantic. Jeanette Rankin of Montana was the only woman to

vote in favour of suffrage when she was the first woman elected to Congress and her card event drops a ton of cubes in the Plains and a column in Congress. Maud Wood Park was an incredibly effective lobbyist so her card event adds a full third of the support needed in Congress. I'm particularly attached to Mary Church Terrell, a pacifist from Washington, DC who later took part in sit ins to desegregate restaurants in her 80s. Her event text instructs players to roll two 8 sided die and place that many cubes, up to 16 cubes, in states of the player's choice!

I also really like the Emma Goldman card in the opposition deck. Goldman was an anarchist who opposed suffrage because she saw it as a waste of time when what American really needed was a worker revolution. Showing this kind of resistance to suffrage from the left is a part of exploring the nuance in the opposition. Her event text builds power for opposition because we see still the status quo exploit divisions, whatever their ideological origins, for its own advantage.

**Why did we need this game in the world?**

I hope *Votes for Women* brings more people into wargaming. It introduces a few basic mechanics with a relatively easy to learn design that can serve as an "on-ramp" to more complex games. I hope the theme of *Votes for Women* inspires designers and publishers to expand the scope of game themes so more people might be interested in coming to the table.

I also hope *Votes for Women* brings more people into movements. I can see the kind of world we could be living in, a connected society that upholds dignity for each person no matter where they live or what they look like. That world is attainable if enough people join together. I've interacted with so many board gamers who are thoughtful, kind, and generous, and I hope everyone who plays *Votes for Women* will consider joining an organization, a cause, or a movement to become a part of making the world - or just their corner of it - a better place. 🌱





# SPACE PARK

Become the galaxy's next great explorer, or... don't?

Designer: Henry Audubon | Publisher: Keymaster Games



2019's *Parks* hit me right in the feels, after I picked a copy solely on the back of the beautiful artwork. To my joy, inside was a light-but-robust celebration of rambling and natural beauty. It remains one of my favourite games, the full package of play and presentation.

So when Fil from All Rolled Up excitedly showed me *Space Park*, the third entry in Keymaster Games' *Parks* series? Well I think my exact words were "I must have that, please take my money".

Was it worth it? It's fair to say *Space Park* does two things very well; retrofuturist space art – think the Jetsons, but way more psychedelic – and unnecessarily chunky spaceships to move around and hold in your hands and make childish "Whoosh" noises as you move them around.

They aren't simply ornaments either: they represent your tactile engagement with the game as you travel from destination to destination, completing exploration badges to prove yourself as the galaxy's next great explorer.

One mechanic that may be unique to *Space Park* is that it's the locations you *leave* that are activated, not the



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Starlight station tile
- ▶ 6 Destination tiles
- ▶ 3 Rocket miniatures
- ▶ 24 Sun crystals
- ▶ 12 Moon crystals
- ▶ 12 Sea crystals
- ▶ Scout standee
- ▶ Controller
- ▶ 10 Fast travel passes
- ▶ 15 Explore point tokens
- ▶ First player marker
- ▶ 27 Badge cards

ones you land on. All my players struggled to pick that up initially – we are trained from a young age to know that landing on the snake causes the problem, not leaping off. It's a change that threatens to takes your focus off where your ship will land, vital for planning your next actions.

Underneath the visuals (and the rockets) is a little engine builder, where collecting badges makes picking up the next one cheaper, or generates extra crystals, accelerating the rate of progress as the game goes on. Once any player hits 20XP, everyone completes the round, and scores are totted up. Thus a player may still win, even if they didn't quite finish first.

Aside from the order the badge cards are drawn there's not too much luck here, and lots of jostling-for-the-next-space player interactions. Even the cards lie with three face up and visible, with the option to draw another and choose from four total – leaving less chance you are stuck with something that doesn't fit your goals.

Forming an effective but flexible strategy is key here – or as my 12 year old worded it "it's all about how you *planet*". He did at least have the self-awareness to be ashamed of that one.

The solo game is close to the base game, although punishingly hard to win; if you don't get the right cards come up, it's probably impossible – but therein lies the joy of solo. Just reset the boundary you define as a win, or play again. It's another opportunity to fiddle with rockets, collect shiny gems and revel at Orlin Culture Shop's lovely illustrations.

And that's *Space Park*, really. Not quite as satisfying as *Parks*, but also not as complex. It may even be the perfect gateway game, one that says "Look how enjoyable, how accessible and how attractive his hobby can be".

CHRIS LOWRY

## PLAY IT? YES

Bouncing between locations on a space rocket, collecting crystals and having a great time? Sounds worth having a go.



## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED STREETS...

...Light on rules, quick to play, both have a bright, clean visual appeal. Just make sure you use *Streets*' optional Business token rules to make it really zip.





# LIVING WELL IS THE BEST REVENGE

Best served cold, somewhere else

**Designer:** Cory Jones, Ben Stoll, Mataio Wilson | **Publisher:** Cryptozoic Entertainment



**L**iving Well Is The Best Revenge is a dice-rolling card-flipping game that's part tableau builder, part dice placement game, and mostly an unfulfilled vibe. Just look at that name. Just look at that cover. You know why I picked this up for review – it looks really cool with the 'French GCSE textbook meets Dungeons & Dragons' art style of Steve Rhodes. It's got one of those funny long names that should be the title of your favourite post-rock band's third album. It promises dumb dice rolling and a bit of fun. The cards even kind of 'transform' from one side to the other when they're unlocked – we all like a levelling up montage after all. But *Living Well Is The Best Revenge* is more of an unsatisfying compromise, rather than beating up the school bully.

Each player takes a couple of dice, and lays all of their double-sided cards in front of them. One a player's

turn they'll roll their player and power dice, while everyone else rolls their power dice (a single dice at the start of the game). If their opponents match one of their own unlocked cards, and the current player's dice results, they get a point. The current player can then use already unlocked abilities by matching numbers, or always on powers. After that players get to unlock cards exactly equal to their player dice total. As you can tell, this is a lot of back and forth for what should be a simple dice game. The fun comes in how you apply your dice and what you unlock with your rolls – but every step has some little twist of bookkeeping that ensure it doesn't flow and it's not really all that fun. Oh, and there's also reroll tokens in the mix too for an extra layer of admin.

There is a school of game design which seems to like to take a single

idea and then add obstacles to the player and call that a game. This is a great example of something a little undercooked or overdone. It's not that there's too much in the game, just that the flow is so poor that it gets in the way of what should be a silly little game with some cool art that you play while having some beers and a salty snack.

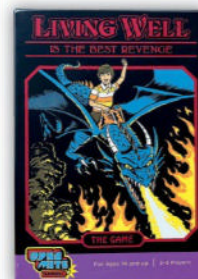
The powers are fun take-that stuff (literally halfling someone's points is a laugh), and the dice allocation and unlocking is quite pleasing, but the whole thing fails to come together in anything meaningful.

Living well is avoiding this game, however nice it looks. ●

**CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT**

## PLAY IT? NO

A disappointment of a game that should have been so much less, and so much more fun. Baffling.



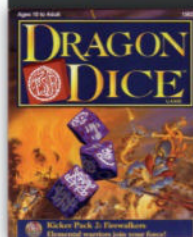
## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 40 Tarot sized cards
- ▶ 8 Played dice
- ▶ 8 Power dice
- ▶ 24 Reroll tokens
- ▶ 4 Player boards
- ▶ 4 Player tokens



## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED DRAGON DICE...

This very simple game of rolling and cutting dice pools is a lot less complex with a lot more fun than *Living Well*...





# WHAT'S IN A GAME? THE SOUND OF THE POLIS

We all know games are good for us, but in what way? Each month Tim Clare untangles the science and philosophy behind what makes games good

Words by **Tim Clare**

Imagine, some four or five millennia ago, not far from the banks of the Tigris, a merchant and some local bureaucrat sitting down in the shade of a storehouse to play a game. Maybe the board is carved out of wood, maybe it's etched into the dirt or rock. The playing pieces might be individually-sculpted dogs or pigs, or just pebbles.

Their act of play, this familiar ritual which anyone today – despite colossal changes across almost every other domain of human life – would instantly recognise and comprehend, might just look like an age-old exercise in destressing and goofing off. With the important work of trade out of the way, the pottery or grain or cattle properly accounted for, the tithe paid or the deal agreed upon, these two people get to shed their professional roles for a while, rest their legs and distract their minds with something of little consequence.

And, to be sure, this is part of it. Games can be chew-toys for the psyche, diversions that occupy all the algorithms that might otherwise turn themselves towards the infinite task of anticipating and proposing solutions for every problem that might arise. A game takes the paranoid military dictator in our brain and says 'hey, you know what would be really helpful? Can you make sure all our fighter jets have got cool lightning bolt decals?' and that's him harmlessly occupied for the next month rather than trying to start wars.

But more is going on here. Some historians have gone so far as to argue these two domains – trade and negotiation on one hand, play on the other – are indivisible. Since, wherever civilisation springs up, games appear simultaneously, mightn't it be the case that either is necessary for the other to exist?

Tabletop games – and I'm using 'tabletop' here in its metaphorical sense, given that, for the steppe nomads scratching grids into flat rocks, a table would have been decadent encumbrance – are inherently political. Not in the sense of their embodying one particular ideology or another, but in how they allow the formation of ideologies at all.

Games are politics you can touch. Let us say that this stone here is a child trying to get to the watering hole, and this stone here is a hungry wolf. If you don't say 'ok', if you don't agree to that establishing of a shared truth, the game is not possible. The stones remain two boring, ordinary pebbles. But as soon as two or more people collaborate in the communal space of the gaming table – okay, these are the safe spaces where

the child can rest, these are split sticks we'll throw to see how far the wolf moves each turn – something miraculous happens. We transpose something onto nothing. And in this abstract space consisting entirely of temporary agreements, incredible drama and complexity can take place.

Many basic, foundational components of civilisation – currency, bureaucracy, laws – cannot exist without consensus. This consensus, as in a game, involves the transposition of something onto nothing. The emergence of 'spade money' in Qin Dynasty China, for example, required merchants and labourers to agree that special representations of spade heads could actually stand in for goods or services. Yes, it's an ornamental spade too fragile to actually dig with – and therefore, in a practical sense, worth very little – but let us say that it is *also* money we can exchange with each other. The shared agreement, the political game, makes a new reality possible. Something that is not true becomes, through consensus, if not true then real.

Many developmental psychologists note that, as children grow older, their games move from exercises in freeform imagination to more complex, rulebound affairs. During games of hide and seek we had an elaborate ritual for deciding how long the player who was 'It' had to count before coming to find us, where various tests determined the number they'd count up to, whether they'd count fast or slow and whether they'd count in anything from quarters to increments of ten.







Some of these rules were obviously inherited tweaks that prevented unfun strategies – the person counting was required to incant ‘no fools around me, up nor down me’ as a kind of ward against anyone who might attempt to stand right next to them and touch base the instant they opened their eyes. We agreed upon boundaries to the area of play.

In any given game we were competing against each other, but the enterprise that made our competition possible was pure politics. ‘Politics’ has its root in the Greek *polis* – which we see today in words like ‘metropolis’ – meaning city. Etymologically speaking, it’s about

managing the complex demands of lots of us living together.

To do that, we have to practise negotiating and agreeing upon a shared reality, the terms over which further debate can take place. The merchant and bureaucrat playing by the Tigris aren’t just blowing off steam – they’re practising and reaffirming their commitment to this sort of cooperative bedrock.

To me, games are like those test areas you see in spy movies or science fiction, where the characters

are looking down through reinforced glass while on the other side, down in a hangar bay a huge flamethrower tests the heat-shielding on the experimental car, or test dummy gets vaporised by a faulty teleporter. We get to explore, safely, a range of negotiation strategies, based on a range of needs, from temporary alliances and friendly trades through to deception, betrayal, browbeating and outright aggression.

But even when a game doesn’t allow for explicit politics within its mechanics, the fact it works at all is a testament to our incredible capacity as humans – perhaps our key competitive edge – to construct a shared reality.

Now, I’m sure this will come as a rude shock, but in the real world politics doesn’t always result in positive outcomes. Sometimes this capacity for constructing a consensus creates groups playing radically different, mutually incompatible games for very real stakes. The very existence of alternative games feels like a violation. It feels like cheating.

This isn’t to dismiss political ideologies as mere games, so much as to elevate games’ importance in our lives. An election is a game with clear rules, a time limit, a scoring system – the only un-game-like element is its real world consequences. Televised debates take a very game-like form, where candidates are given time limits to deliver answers to set questions or offer rebuttals, then various media outlets hold polls to determine the ‘winner’.

In recognising the ludic character of political discourse, economics, the justice system and so on, we can take a step back from them – not to disengage from decisions affecting our lives, but to better appraise the assumptions undergirding them. What are the unspoken rules guiding who gets to play, and what is and isn’t considered a legitimate move? Who decided upon those rules? Who do they favour?

In playing games, we practise working together to manage healthy conflict within a broader context of trust, mutual respect and the desire for everyone to come away better off. Even if we can’t transplant these ideals to our international politics just yet, hopefully we can bring a little of it to our daily interactions, and recognising that there are better and worse ways of winning. 🎲



“ In playing games, we practise working together to manage healthy conflict within a broader context of trust. ”





# FALL OF MAGIC

Doomscrolling, but not like that

Designer: Ross Cowman | Publisher: Heart of Deercorn



Games are magical objects by their nature. A pile of tokens, plastic bits and glorified wood chippings are going to transform your evening from one practicing bad posture around a dining table into one of adventure, commerce or war. Roleplaying games can send you places with little more than a dice and a few sentences from a poorly printed book you picked up at a convention. There's something completely transporting about all of these acts as you give up the world around you and commit, through the use of the objects in front of you, to being somewhere else as well as someone else.

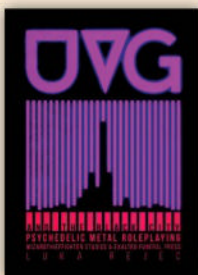
Whether other games are planned out as magically teleporting as they are, or that's just something transferred from the medium we're working in, it's very hard to argue that *Fall of Magic* is anything other than designed to be a magical item.

A long box contains a canvas scroll on which is, for the most part, the game. There's a very slim book here explaining how the game should progress, but this



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Five and a half foot long double sided canvas scroll
- 5 Metal coin tokens
- Six sided dice
- 12 Lost island cards



canvas is very much where the action is. It is *not* 'just a prop'. Players will pick a coin and a class or background and begin their journey. This journey is the crux of the game, players are leading the magus (a magician or sorcerer of sorts) back to their homeland. The world of magic is dying, and the only plan is to return to its source and discover whether it can be saved – or whether you're just delivering someone to where they want to die.

The scroll is initially laid out so you can only see the very first location, as you travel along the lines to different locations, you'll be asked to describe what your character does at each place they stop at. There's a series of prompts, and occasionally a dice roll or two to discover your fate at a couple of locations. Later you'll discover wonderful things about where you are and the materials you hold in your hands.

*Fall of Magic* can rightly be accused of being a 'story game' rather than a more 'traditional' roleplaying game. The reward for roleplaying here (rather than say, getting some gold and improving your character) is that sense of discovery. Rolling out this screen-printed (by hand) map and moving your metal coin to the next area is its own kind of storytelling. And you have to choose which path to follow, a worthy topic of discussion at our table. There's also a later section which randomises the cards you lay on the board as you hop between islands – this offers the promise of a different story next time.

If you're looking for a game that's real. ●

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

## PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY

A truly magical experience, if you're willing to believe in it.

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ULTRAVIOLET GRASSLANDS AND THE BLACK CITY...

Want to go on an epic journey of absolute beauty? He's another outing for you all.





# HEART OF ICE

Ice Cold Near Alex

Designer: Dave Morris | Publisher: Other Worlds



Following *Storm Weavers*, this is another 'book with bits', a deluxe re-issue of a work published in 2013. This time the setting is a post-apocalyptic future with cyberpunk trimmings. Climate control has long been entrusted to a giant AI network named GAIA; a massive mistake (didn't they watch the films?) with catastrophic consequences for the planet. It is now 2300, Earth is blanketed with snow and ice and GAIA is omnipotent and possibly 'insane'.

You are sitting in your local inn in Northern Italy in the company of Kyle Boche when an old news feed tells of a fallen meteorite known as the Heart of Volent, venerated by a cult since it purportedly holds massive psychic potential for someone in direct physical contact. You decide to travel to Du-en in Egypt to investigate.

Use one of seven presets for your character or create your own

by selecting four skills from the 12 available. Survival would seem a good choice, as would cybernetics or lore for intel gathering. Close combat, shooting or psi are your combat options; all are simple and there are no dice throws. The bookmark shaped character sheets are a nice touch.

You now start a journey which takes around three quarters of the adventure. Initially you have to decide whether to travel east or west, and alone or with Boche. Travel is for the most part linear; you have to keep pushing on. For a time it's fairly easy going but after a while you reach a long stretch of icy desert wastes and traversing these is absolutely brutal. If you are not sufficiently prepared you will die. As you travel you hear about other people making the same journey and you might encounter them along the way. You also learn about a way of destroying the Heart

(which will require a partner), but perhaps you plan to harness its power for yourself. There will be a couple of side locations to explore for loot and intel along the way, and one or two big surprises. You can access atmospheric soundtracks and mark your progress on the supplied scratch map by matching printed symbols. The Moebius style full page colour artwork is good.

If you survive the icy wastes you arrive at Du-en and this is where the adventure goes up a gear. Here are gathered a motley bunch of adventurers; a US assassin, female clones, a psionic lord and others, including Kyle Boche. None of them are ideal partner material, and all are armed and extremely dangerous. There are just a couple of days to explore the ruins before deciding what to do. My first character was a rogue spy and although he had used his skills to good effect along the way, learned a lot from infiltrating the Compass Society and survived the ice trek, he fell to an early encounter at Du-en. My second, a Psi specialist visionary took the alternative route from the inn, had a very different experience, and died of cold. My third reached the end game, partly because he had a particular skill set which I guessed would unlock a major short cut.

To be frank this one grew on me. It's not perfect - another keyword or two wouldn't come amiss particularly regarding Boche, and sometimes too-abrupt transitions and minor story disconnects make you feel you must have turned to the wrong section. On the other hand, you can generally anticipate what items will be most important, and there are few illogical sudden deaths. The end sequence is memorable. ●

DEBBIE BROWN

## PLAY IT? YES

Yes, it's a classic adventure with interesting NPC interaction, but you can pick up the original paperback for a fraction of the price.



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Adventure book (hard cover)
- ▶ 7 character cards
- ▶ 3 bookmark style character sheets
- ▶ 5 world maps
- ▶ Compass Society ID card



## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ESCAPE FROM THE DARK SECTOR

A similar atmosphere of dread stalks you as you hope to outwit creatures and machines in this high tech shooter adventure.





# INCANDESCENT GROTTOES

Designer: Gavin Norman | Publisher: Exalted Funeral



If *Old School Essentials* is the 'Classic-D&D but for cool kids' game, then this might as well be bundled up as a starter set. With art by Nate Treme and the promise of both a dungeon to explore and a dragon to die to, this is a great place to start with old-school roleplaying. The writing is terse, but flavourful – and most importantly, there's loads of jokes. You might be mucking about with teleporters, getting some weird environmental red herrings from the encounter table, or just having to deal with swimming monkeys. As most dungeon delves require navigational choices, each passage comes with a bit of whiff of what's ahead. Ideal for leading players by the nose.

Nate's artwork is the classic slightly goofy and absolutely charming work we're always big fans of. Jellied skeletons and broom-carrying zombies look at from the page at us,

and it's a reassuring sign that you're meant to have fun, rather than Serious Roleplaying™.

The dungeon has a few NPCs that could easily become player characters when they inevitably die (amusingly one is hung upside down over a pit, a great introduction for mid-adventure).

The book also introduces the concept that there are factions within the location, and that they don't all get on. As an adventure to run as someone new to the game, it gives your player all the rope they need to make their own chaos without the need to line things up.

All of this is bundled up together with some very useful map placement (you really can just run this blind from the book, if you need to) and inline stat blocks where needed. A great way to get started in the business of 'stealing things from under the ground'.

**CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT**

**PLAY IT? YES**

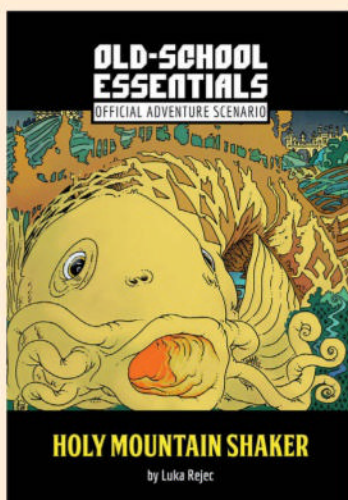
# HOLY MOUNTAIN SHAKER

Designer: Luka Rejec | Publisher: Necrotic Gnome



bet there is a very cool adventure somewhere within the ideas of *Holy Mountain Shaker*, and I wish Luka had actually written it. The first ten or so pages are quite strong, setting up a conflict between native villagers, newly arrived industrial workers and a secret society devoted to the worship of a giant fish at the centre of the titular Holy Mountain. The exploration part of the adventure also has an interesting gimmick; traditional encounters rolls are replaced by Challenges, of which 4/10 are location specific and are usually just encounters or earthquakes. As you backtrack out of the adventure locations, they start to collapse from the earthquakes, making it almost feel like a living, changing world.

Unfortunately, as soon as we actually get into the descriptions of the locations, that all falls away. The bulk of the book is written in that classic *Old School Essentials* style that



makes everything feel samey and flat. What could be vibrant locations full of intrigue and excitement are instead presented as shopping lists of bolded

verbs and parentheticals. Show don't tell is so clichéd piece a of classic writing advice that it feels corny to trot it out here, but I'd much prefer to read about why a glade is hauntingly beautiful, instead of being told "hauntingly beautiful glade (swaying pines)". Some actual sentences would be a welcome change,

That said if what you're looking for out of an adventure book is vibes and art, you might find a lot to love here. Luka's signature art style fills the pages of the book with life and colour, giving the entire thing a feeling of classic European adventure comics. There's a vibrant setting here, but it's a shame that the writing is never given the opportunity to do it justice! If the art speaks to you and you're a fan of the OSE style then pick it up, but everyone else should steer clear.

**ROZ LEAHY**

**PLAY IT? MAYBE**



# D666

Designer: Tim Roberts | Publisher: Critical Kit



Some solo game are hell. But few as much as this one where you're scribbling your own personal underworld down like a free-flowing paper version of the seminal 90s dungeon making game, *Dungeon Keeper*. Here you grab a pencil, paper, and a character sheet, and start planning out your dungeon. Each turn you'll roll some of the three dice to generate not only the next room you're going to add to your drawing, but also the events that happen within. The goal of the game is to collect together souls of the damned that you have found exploring the underworld and then deposit them within machines of torture as you expand your realm. It's surprisingly appealing to draw little devices of pain, like a teenager scribbling in the corners of their schoolbooks. You don't have to relish this part, but it probably helps.

Channel your inner Sid from *Toy Story* and you'll be fine.

To win, you need to have 25 souls trapped in these machines. To build them you'll need materials, which will come from discovering more of the dungeon and combat. It's a low-stress bit of project and resource management that gets out of the way of the best bit – which is just expanding hell.

It's good and gentle fun to wander around, dropping in new rooms and inventive little torture devices. Despite its demonic theme, there's something very relaxing about the whole experience – it's an ideal Sunday afternoon game. ●

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT



PLAY IT? YES

# WITCHBURNER

Designer: Luka Rejec | Publisher: Exalted Funeral



It's a witch hunt, literally. Whether your players actually find a witch\* (spoiler) and put them to trial is another matter, there's a lot of weird stuff happening in the town, and you've only got a few weeks to work out who you're putting on the pyre.

This is another cutting-edge narrative game from Luka Rejec. The game claims to be 'novella-length', which suggests something about its literary goals (after all, a lot of RPGs are that length without making the comparison).

Your players have four weeks to work out who is the witch by talking to the huge cast of NPCs (30 or so, each with a page of their attitudes, secrets and life). Each of these is entangle and connected with one another in a way that suggests some kind of guilt. Whatever your players do they will find a way to proceed with their search. The book even comes with daily events for running the game too.

There's different councils and groups that are required to be convinced, and a judicious use of player sheets is required. You'll need more evidence to sentence a council member rather than your average town dweller.

Importantly, while this can be used for any number of games, this is a book which can be used like an advanced social-deduction-storytelling game. Yes, when the mob gathers up there are hit dice to roll, but for the most part you're just playing investigators trying to find the witch amongst the people of the town. It's not far off a *Blood on the Clock Tower* experience, with a little bit of dice rolling. A modern classic that is, if you'll excuse the pun, a bit of a slow burn. ●

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

PLAY IT? YES

\*Spoiler: there isn't one



# DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: KEYS FROM THE GOLDEN VAULT

Heists with heart

Designer: Various | Publisher: Wizards of the Coast



**D**ungeons & Dragons fans have been clamouring for some first-rate heisting ever since it became clear that the otherwise rather wonderful *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist* campaign didn't quite deliver

on its grandiose title. Their long wait has finally been rewarded with a collection of over a dozen adventures dedicated to the noble art of the heist, each of which can either be run as a stand-alone quest or integrated into

a sprawling campaign that sends the heroes rocketing across the multiverse.

The book is the latest product of one of *Wizards of the Coast's* regular releases of themed adventure



anthologies and is quite possibly the strongest entry in the series since the nautical-minded *Ghosts of Saltmarsh*. As with its predecessors, the anthology has a fairly simple premise that can be used to tie the entire book together if you wish. In this case, this thread is the titular Golden Vault – a mysterious organization dedicated to righting wrongs and warding off evil via the medium of super-sweet heists.

Honestly, if you want to get an idea of *Keys from the Golden Vault's* general vibe, you needn't look much further than the fact that if the table decides to use the organization as a patron, they get their mission briefings in the form of keys that cause a magical music box to read out their instructions. The keys, naturally, self-destruct after use.

Under the right circumstances, these missions can deliver incredible opportunities for roleplaying and the chance for players to do so much more than swing swords and toss lightning bolts. They allow for improvisation and imagination to reign supreme, and make (almost) every combat feel pivotal. The heists are the perfect breeding ground for the stories that your table will be sharing for years to come – the ones that start “*So, I was flirting with the devilish croupier so that he'd slip me a key card when all of a sudden the alarms started blaring and Jenny's wizard tried to use her martini as fuel for an extra-large fireball...*”

A lot of this is due to the simple, unassailable fact that heist missions are inherently badass. They are, in many ways, the platonic ideal of a good *D&D* quest, with a small-but-skilled team of heroes overcoming the odds with a pungent blend of careful planning and seat-of-the-pants improvisation. However, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't give the writers of *Keys from the Golden Vault* their due.

While the book naturally has the uneven quality that comes from sourcing 13 different adventures from 13 different writers, the quality is generally very high. The writing zips along and the ideas are – for the most part – incredibly inventive. Indeed, the entire idea of a slick heist is buried in a wealth of pop culture history, and *Keys from the Golden Vault* isn't afraid

to draw directly from its sources. This self-aware mish-mash of references results in a colourful array of missions that range from robbing an infernal casino to getting embroiled in a murder investigation aboard an interplanar express train (arguably my favourite adventure in the book).

Every adventure comes with a rather lovely hand-drawn map for the players to use in their planning – one that is missing a few important details, obviously – as well as a few briefing notes that can be shared through a friendly NPC handler. This allows for some rather lovely planning scenes, as the heroes scramble to source a fire-proof cloak before assaulting a villains' volcano lair, or highfalutin disguises for crashing a museum gala.

As you may have guessed from earlier mentions of interplanar trains and the like, *Keys from the Golden Vault* also makes good use of *D&D's* oft-neglected multiverse. While many of the heists are rooted in standard Forgotten Realms setting (including a not particularly subtle nod to the *Honor Among Thieves* movie), others burst gleefully into other planes and make delightful use of heist-friendly concepts that don't quite gel with typical medieval-ish tropes such as keycards.

This kind of delightful nonsense will likely be a turnoff for any groups who like the fantasy grounded in something a bit more historical, of course. However, it helps to set a tone that gets the adventure rocking along with a bare minimum of introduction.

Ultimately, the biggest issue with *Keys from the Golden Vault* is less to do with the books, but rather the system it tries to work with. Or, perhaps, fails to work with.

As successful as *D&D's* fifth edition has been, there's no escaping the fact that it's built around fantasy adventuring, and not planning and executing heists. Where other tabletop RPGs that place heisting at the core of their identity – most notably *Blades in the Dark* – have rules and frameworks for handling things like drawing up plans and ratcheting up the tensions as the heroes approach the goal, *D&D* leaves almost all of this in the DM's hands.

The result of this is either a pile of extra work and pressure for the DM,

or a session that can feel weirdly paced and lacking in tension. Without rules (or even guidelines) about handling the plan, it's easy for hours to pass while players bicker about details and back-and-forth the entire adventure into the ground. Running a heist isn't like running any other kind of adventure, and it's rare for the book to acknowledge that.

Sometimes, it feels tempting to take the ideas presented in *Keys from the Golden Vault* and transport them into a system that isn't built for dungeon crawls, where the conventions of the game don't oblige the DM to describe boring storerooms with as much detail as the treasure vault. You can get around this by having a GM who's confident enough to make the changes on the fly and improvise a few scenes whole cloth, of course. But you could also say that about a sheet of paper with “ADVENTURE???” scrawled across the top in Sharpie, so a £40-ish book doesn't get a pass on that front.

On top of this clashing of gameplay gears, it feels as though only about half of the adventure writers got the memo that the really crucial part of a good heist story is the unexpected complication – the revelation that there was a mole in the party, or that the bad guys have just upgraded the vault. These twists are key in helping the game really pop and sizzle at the table, and if they aren't included the entire adventure can fall flat. As strange as it might sound, a plan going off without a hitch isn't actually as much fun as you might hope.

Still, as annoying as these elements may be, there's no denying that *Keys from the Golden Vault* is an impressive bit of content for *D&D's* sprawling fanbase. It's a little bit dumb, a little heavy on the cliches, and deeply awkward in places, but you'd be hard-pressed to argue that its heart isn't in the right place.

Ultimately, it focuses on the fun that's inherent to the premise of magical heroes pulling off awesome heists. And that is really rather a lot of fun. ●

**RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES**

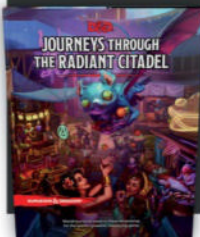
#### PLAY IT? YES

A fun-filled collection of heists with a distinctly *D&D* twist.



#### TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED JOURNEYS THROUGH THE RADIANT CITADEL

Though it has some major differences from *D&D's* latest plane-hopping anthology, both deliver a pile of solid adventuring.







# DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: HONOUR AMONG THIEVES

The world's biggest RPG gets the blockbuster treatment... And succeeds its Performance check with flying colours

**Designer:** John Francis Daley, Jonathan Goldstein | **Publisher:** Entertainment One



It's kind of astonishing that it's taken nearly 50 years for Hollywood to finally get *Dungeons & Dragons* right. Especially when you consider that, to a large degree, the '80s boom in fantasy cinema (from *Conan the Barbarian* to *Krull* to *Willow*) was sparked by the game's phenomenal success. Yet, despite Gary Gygax's own best efforts, all we got was a mildly embarrassing cartoon TV series about a gang of kids sucked into a *D&D* world via a magical fairground ride... Followed years later by a thankfully largely forgotten movie starring Jeremy Irons and Marlon Wayans, which landed with a splat at the turn of the century and pretty much got everything wrong.

And now, at long, long last, we have *Dungeons & Dragons: Honour Among Thieves* riding to the rescue. Its writer-directors John Francis Daley and Jonathan Goldstein previously made 2018's *Game Night*, an inventive action comedy built around a gamer couple (Jason Bateman and Rachel McAdams) in a role-play murder mystery that goes hilariously-horribly wrong. That's the first good sign. The second good sign is that both Daley and Goldstein are *D&D* players. (In fact, former actor Daley also played the game on-screen as lead geek Sam Weir in the "Discos and Dragons" episode of short-lived cult TV show *Freaks and Geeks*.) It is safe to say they both 'get' the game, and that shines through in their film.

This manifests itself, firstly, through their respect for the lore – specifically, the core campaign setting of The Forgotten Realms. The action kicks off with a daring escape from Revel's End prison in Icewind Dale and centres primarily on the city of Neverwinter, with an excursion to the Underdark along the way. Charismatic anti-hero Edgin (Chris Pine) is a lute-plucking former member of the Harpers faction; his best friend Holga (Michelle Rodriguez) is a barbarian of the Uthgardt tribe; and the lead villain Sofina (Daisy Head) is one of the Red Wizards of Thay. Anyone who's played the *Out of the Abyss* campaign, meanwhile, will appreciate a star cameo from heavyweight red



dragon Themberchaud, while the malevolent lich Szass Tam also makes an appearance.

There are carefully applied references to gaming concepts, such as magic item attunement and the Wild Shape ability – though tiefling druid Doric (*IT*'s Sofia Lillis) flagrantly breaks the rules by shapeshifting far too many times per short rest, and by 'impossibly' transforming into an owlbear. Though, of course, this doesn't break the rule of cool, which clearly in Daley and Goldstein's twinned minds supersedes all others. Speaking of monsters, there are plenty of other creatures plucked from the pages of the *Manual*, including displacer beasts, gelatinous cubes and intellect devourers, the latter of which feature purely to service one of the film's best jokes.

Which brings us to the other way in which *Honour Among Thieves* respects and understands its source material. It doesn't simply translate the game to cinema. It captures the *spirit* of the game. Its characters are a diverse bunch of misfits who, like so many new adventuring parties,

must learn to work together to achieve their objective – in this case, retrieving an ancient relic that can bring someone back from the dead (although, of course, it's really not that straightforward). More importantly, like *Critical Role* before it, the movie realises that *D&D* isn't just about imaginary worlds, deadly encounters and high adventure. It's about having a good time with friends. Having a good laugh.

Similar to *Guardians of the Galaxy* and 1999's *The Mummy*, the film's primary aim is to bring the funny, which it does in spades. As well as respecting the game, it simultaneously exhibits a healthy *disrespect*, you could say – as shown in one of its best sequences, in which the "arbitrary" rules of the Speak With Dead spell

As they proved in the similarly funny *Game Night*, Daley and Goldstein aren't too shabby at the kinetic stuff, either. *Honour Among Thieves* boasts some impeccably choreographed fight scenes (Holga's mastery of improvised weapons is bone-crunchingly impressive) and visually ambitious action sequences. Early in the film, Doric uses her (rule-breaking) shapeshifting abilities to spectacular effect during a one-take chase set-piece, while later on an ingeniously placed magic portal (created by a "Hither-Thither staff", which every player is going to demand of their eye-rolling DM for years to come) becomes the central device in a fantastic heist.

The film's McGuffin-centric plot veers and twists so much you'd be



are exploited for maximum comic effect, with Edgin and his crew digging up half a tribal burial ground in search of some vital intel. Régé-Jean Page's absurdly perfect paladin Xenk represents the min-maxing guest player who turns up for a session, dominates proceedings and shows everyone up with their OP character. Then there's Hugh Grant's wily rogue Forge Fitzwilliam, (charlatan background, obviously) who is given some of the film's best lines. "I don't want to see you die," he insists at one point. "Which is why I'm gonna leave the room." The film also isn't afraid to poke fun at itself. "I hate how everyone thinks we can solve any problem with magic," gripes half-elf sorcerer Simon (Justice Smith, trying out a British accent and succeeding brilliantly). "There are limits! This isn't some bedtime story. This is the real world!"

forgiven for losing track of what the characters are trying to achieve in any given moment (though many of us have played campaigns like that, to be fair). But its characters are lovingly fleshed out and, by the final showdown on the streets of Neverwinter, you'll have come to care for them as much as any of your own *D&D* creations, and will likely be left hoping for a sequel. Despite what Simon the sorcerer says, this – of course – isn't the real world. But, in amid all the game references, riffs, gags and set pieces, the movie has real heart. 🍀

**DAN JOLIN**

#### WATCH IT? YES

It's the best film based on a tabletop game since 1985's *Clue*. Okay, so there's not much competition, but even so it delivers in terms of laughs, thrills and, you know what? You may even cry a little.



#### WHO'S IN THE CAST?

- ▶ Chris Pine
- ▶ Michelle Rodriguez
- ▶ Justice Smith
- ▶ Sophia Lillis
- ▶ Hugh Grant
- ▶ Régé-Jean Page
- ▶ Daisy Head
- ▶ Chloe Coleman

#### WATCH THIS IF YOU LIKED GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY...

A gang of loveable, wise-cracking outlaws who, despite their own moral shortcomings, unite to defeat a great evil... Sound familiar? Well it is. But welcomingly so.





# RUM REBELLION

Each month we explore our readers' attics to find long forgotten gaming gems, this month it's the crooks-to-crooks fairytale story of Rum Rebellion

Words and Interview by **Christopher John Eggett**

**W**hat does social mobility look like in colonial period Australia? According to this frankly excellent find by Garry Hrustinsky, it's all about starting off as a deported criminal, with a short period of honest work, before becoming a politician (which is just another word for criminal really, right?).

How do we do this? Well, as the game was made in 1983 it's all about rolling some dice and then moving. To make sure that you're totally aware of which class of people is better than the others, the board is presented as a tiered pyramid – a little bit like those in Teotihuacan, except there's no sacrifices when you get to the top. Save up enough money as a criminal (using cool plastic barrels) to make your way up the ladder of society. But if you roll wrong there's plenty of ways to just miss a turn or two. Like many games of its time, it's a race, with the main friction coming from losing out through chance. If you wanted something more strategic you will have to wait a decade or so at least. At higher levels of the pyramid you'll be collecting barrels from others around the table. You can't really control this in any way, so it's a case of just hoping you hit another way to make money.

The game was originally sold with a kind of 'teach your kids history' game, and with that a little piece of history is stored here. It's accuracy or interest can't really be attested to, but I always like the idea that some games are a way to storing historic events in amber. It's not that this is a good way to do it, but more that it's like smuggling the information into the future in a way that no one suspects.



excellent local produce, beautiful beaches and dramatic landscapes. I still struggle having to listen to that awful Kiwi accent though.

**What game have you found in your attic? (Could you please mention the year and publisher, if you can work it out from what's left of the box?)**

I've found *Rum Rebellion*. The game was published in 1983 by John Sands Pty Ltd.

**Hello! Can you introduce yourself to our readers?**

I'm an Australian living and working in NZ. As a board game enthusiast, I spend too much of my free time convincing family and friends to play board games with me. Thankfully there is an active local gaming community (the Hawke's Bay Geeks Guild) that arranges numerous gaming events. I would like to say that I play to win...if I ever won that much. I am more of a professional seat warmer that is just happy to be invited to the table.

We currently call Napier (an Art Deco city) home, and enjoy a region full of vineyards,

**Whose was it? Who bought it for you?**

The game was purchased back in 1983 by my older brother. Technically it is still his, but I suspect he has long forgotten it. I'm claiming squatter's rights.

**Can you remember how it works and how it plays?**

The game follows the same mechanism popular with many board games at the time: roll the dice, move your character, resolve any conditions of the space that you land on. Very much luck-based.







Where Rum Rebellion was a bit different is the four-tier board. Starting out as a convict, players need to save up sufficient money (in the form of neat little plastic rum barrels) to gain their Ticket of Leave (end their time as a convict) and move to the second tier. Working in a trade (e.g. cooper), players save up to buy their way into the Officer Class of the Rum Corps (the third tier). After collecting 50 votes players can try to become Governor of the Colony by picking up a Win or Lose card (the fourth tier).

**Tell us about any specific memories you might have of playing with it?**

It was the Summer of 1983 and we were visiting our grandparents on their farm. There weren't many kids around the area and not a lot to do on the farm. My brother went into town and came back with the game. We played the

heck out of it – maybe two or three games per day over the space of three weeks. Those Win or Lose cards were a killer. Thinking you had the game in the bag only to draw a Lose card and need to collect votes all over again. I remember one time I tried three times in a row and kept drawing Lose cards. My brother collected 50 votes and won the game on the next card. Then there were the crushing losses where I struggled to advance beyond convict before my brother had won the game.

I have fond memories of the time and how much we enjoyed it. Rum Rebellion saved my Summer that year.

**Release date:**  
1983

**Publisher:**  
John Sands Pty Ltd

**Still Available New?:**  
No!

**Second hand:**  
Somewhat available

**Price:**  
£20-70

**What do you think of it now?**

I played it again with my kids several years back. It was a novel experience, but damn if it isn't a boring game. We have an unspoken agreement to never play it again.

The game has a surprisingly strong theme and, as a kid, it taught me a lot about an interesting period in the birth of modern Australia.

**Are you keeping it, trying to sell it, or dumping it at the charity shop?**

Definitely keeping it. Even just seeing the box triggers memories of a special time and place in my life.

**What do you wish you'd found in your attic instead?**

Aside from a few million dollars? Probably another gaming buddy that I could sneak down at night and play all of the board games with me that my family roll their eyes at. That'll show them! 🗿





# Fish & Katz

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Trailer



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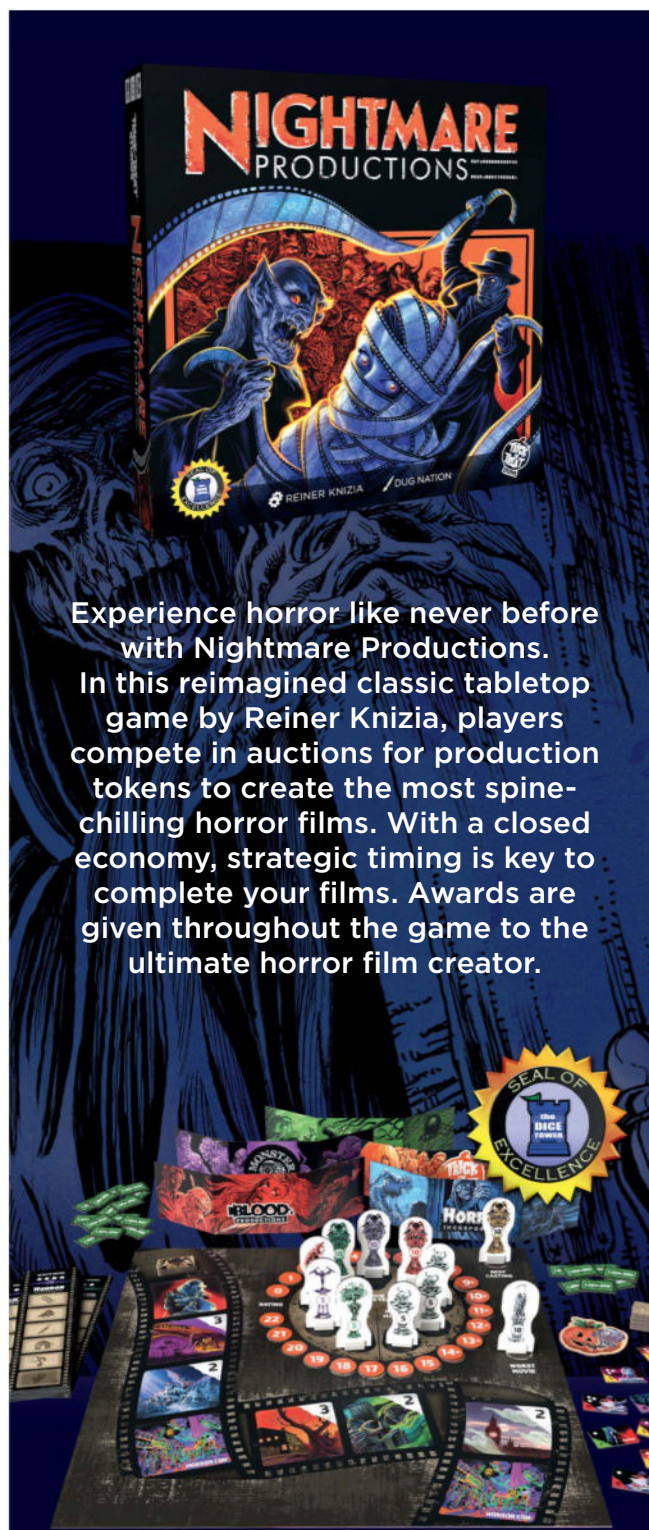
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# Ask Ben

## KICKING THE KICKSTARTER HABIT

Each month our in-house agony aunt, Ben Maddox, answers your ludological lamentations

Words by **Ben Maddox**

### Q. Dear Ben,

I've been trying to send you this message for the last three weeks. I have grazed shins, my calf muscles are screaming at me and I'm sure the puke I just had was a mild form of altitude sickness. This is because I've had to clamber over my recent *ISS Vanguard* all-in pledge to get to my laptop which is in the same room.

I like a drink, I'm not ashamed to admit it, and after I've had a couple of beers I like to cruise the electric highways of the World Wide Web. Some nights I pull my cyber Hum-Vee up outside of Kickstarter and have a look around. Now I know I shouldn't visit Kickstarter when I have low impulse control but the problem is that I have low impulse control.

And the campaign pages are just so enticing. They beckon me in, show me around and direct me to the pledge button on my way out. Luckily I'm a tech douche



so money isn't an issue but yesterday I got my arm caught in my *Zombicide: Black Plague* pledge and thought I was going to end up like that bloke out of 127 Hours and I've got stuff I need to do with that arm!

When the DHL bloke arrives I feel nauseated as he piles box after box on my doorstep. It takes me three pints of Rogue Energy just to get up the courage to bring the boxes in.

Also, I'm worried I'm going to lose the dog.

Please help me Ben, you ludological legionary, before I drown in plastic and poorly conceived game mechanisms.

In growing desperation,  
**Cramped**

### A. Dear Cramped,

The malign and filthy excrescence of consumerism can affect us all in time. That's why I've moved to the cabin in a forest bordering a landfill site. You'd be surprised how much free methane you can get from the crap people throw out and my eyebrows are a small price to pay.

I could prescribe cold turkey. Eating the stuff will sap your will to do anything. That's why everyone's miserable after Christmas but I have a better and far more ludological way to wean yourself from this vile excess.

I present to you, Alea Games. They are the anti-kickstarter publisher. Their art and graphic design is so dull that John Major once asked them if they could "brighten it up a bit", but behind those painfully mundane exteriors hide the most wonderful games. I'll give you three that will cure you in no time.

**1. Las Vegas Royale.** This is that time they thought they'd modernise their look and the 1970s phoned them to tell them what a good job they'd done. Nevertheless this is a rollocking time of chance and bluff. It's wonderful.

**2. Carpe Diem.** The game in which they revamped the graphic design three times and you STILL can't tell the tiles apart unless you're under those lights in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. This is classic Feld though and the simplicity gives way to profundity in the most delicious way.

**3. Castles of Burgundy.** The Big Daddy. When the public called for the game to be pepped up they turned the saturation up to eleven. The colours are sickening but the gameplay is flawless. This is Feld's best and the perfect antidote to rubbish games that look great.

Play these three games and you'll be cured of the wish to clutter up your hallway with useless plastic and if that doesn't work, there's space for you here right next to the discarded beanie baby section.

**With all of my ludological love,  
Ben**

### Seeking guidance?

Have you got a gaming problem? Want Ben to dish out some ludological wisdom in your direction? Get in touch. Contact with Ben on Twitter [@5games4doomsday](#) or email the editor at [christopher.eggett@warnersgroup.co.uk](mailto:christopher.eggett@warnersgroup.co.uk) and we'll publish, and answer, the most amusing problems.



Four games like...

# WARHAMMER 40,000

In the grim darkness of the far future there is only war. But is it how you remember it?

Words by Christopher John Eggett



So, you used to play *Warhammer* and then life, members of the opposite sex, work and outdoor pursuits took over? And now you're wondering whether you should return to the fold and fork over fistfuls of folding money to Games Workshop? Fear not, we have some options for you to weigh up.

When we say *Warhammer* we're not often talking about *Warhammer: The Game of Fantasy Battles*. We're not mucking about with vanilla elves here, we've got space elves, we're talking about *Warhammer 40,000*. This grimdark game of space marines killing Orks, demons being summoned by exploding from the body of the possessed, and xenomorphs tearing their way through interstellar wreckage is the tabletop wargame. In fact, the phrase 'grimdark' comes from the tagline of *Warhammer 40,000*.



Originally designed as *Rogue Traders* by Rick Priestly (with later editions designed by Andy Chambers, Gavin Thorpe, Alessio Cavatore, Jervis Johnson, Pete Hains) a rich seam of dark lore and a way to sell lots of tiny army men was unleashed into the world for teenagers to say 'Whoa! Cool!' and 'is that a sword that's also a chainsaw? Cool!' at.

Generally, like any good miniature war game, player collect an army of an agreed size (some editions use 'points' for this) set them out on a table and then use some form of measuring device to get close enough to one another to start murdering each other. To murder, you roll some dice based on your unit stat, and the other side will like make an armour save to try and survive. Beyond that there's complex stratagems, psychic powers to unleash, and the odd air-drop of terminators into your opponent's line.

And then there's the miniatures painting. You don't have to, but you do really. Painting up some little space marines or deadly genestealers can be therapeutic and with new speed paints (from Army Painter) you can throw together table-ready squads in no time.

With all this the game lives and breathes at the table, you're likely to want to join a club but it can be a bit of an investment. If this is *your game* then that might be all you need.



**RELEASED:** 1987

**DESIGNER:**  
Rick Priestly

**PUBLISHER:**  
Games Workshop

**PLAYERS:** 2+

**PLAY TIME:** 45m+

**RRP:** £32-infinite



## DEADZONE CONNECTION: RATS! IN! SPACE!

What's the best thing about the classic *Warhammer Fantasy* games? That's right, Skaven. Weird rat men, famous for their dark scientific prowess, who it seems, never made it to space or the year 40,000. And the worst thing about *Warhammer 40,000* is the measuring. *Deadzone* has both of these things solved in the form of the Veer-Myn – buff space-rats – and a zonal movement system. *Deadzone* is played on a gridded board where movement is dished out by the number of squares moved, but line of sight remains model-to-model. A clever, quick system for fighting for the future of the galaxy.



## STARGRAVE CONNECTION: A campaign for one

Gather a crew of ten miniature space-persons and engage in small scale skirmishes across a huge campaign. And you can do that all by yourself if you want. *Stargrave*, like its fantasy predecessor *Frostgrave*, is optionally (but maybe most popularly) a solo game. If you're worried that you wouldn't be able to find yourself at enough gaming tables at clubs or the thought of painting whole squads of miniatures then this is a great choice. The game hangs on the edge of nearly being a roleplaying game with its campaign and advancement systems. Plus, you can use any miniatures you like for it, meaning you don't *have* to be totally out of pocket.



## BATTLETECH CONNECTION: The joy of mechs

Big robots punching each other? Check. Complex and crunchy system? Check. A quite limited number of miniatures to paint? Check. *Battletech* is perfect for those who like the tactical decisions of a wargame and complex combat systems, but really, really don't want to pick up a paintbrush for more than one slap-on coat. Grab your contrast paints and throw it on we say, it won't matter once you start calculating how hot the engine's getting from firing lasers three turns in a row. A great option for those who don't want to lose any complexity, but don't want to pick up two hobbies at once. The starter set is quite limited, but a good way in. The *A Game of Armoured Combat* version is a little beefier for those that don't mind jumping into the deeper end.



## MARVEL CRISIS PROTOCOL CONNECTION:

In the bright spotlight of the comic book past, there is only spandex

Look, maybe you want the minis. Maybe you want the mighty bits. But maybe you don't want the crushingly grim lore about hive cities, dead god-emperors, warriors trapped in crystals and all that. Maybe you want some extremely oddly named people dashing about in brightly coloured spandex? While the movies might be a bit hit-and-miss, this is an absolute *kerpow!* of a hit on the table. Using team affiliations you build up your dream team of super heroes and villains, and then spend time throwing terrain at one another until the credits roll. What more could you want?









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Trailer

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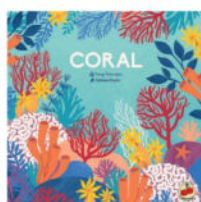


# WHO GOES FIRST?

Join us on a tour of some of our favourite ways to start a game

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

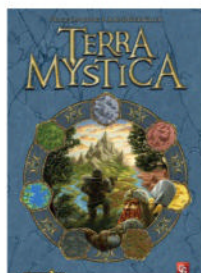
**D**eciding on the first player is an important part of any game night. Often there's a willing victim ready to hop in and ask the first silly question about what something does on the board, but other times you want something a little bit spicier. This is where the humble 'choosing the first player mechanism' comes in to play. If you're like me you're always a bit disappointed when the rulebook just says 'select a player' or 'roll a dice, the highest rolling player goes first' when it comes to who starts a board game. Why not then, instead, use one of these 20 ways to pick the starting player. And hey, if you're not sure which one to pick, you can always roll a 20 sided dice.



**1**  
“The player who last touched seawater starts”  
*Coral*



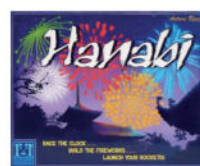
**2**  
“The youngest player is the start player”  
*Santorini*



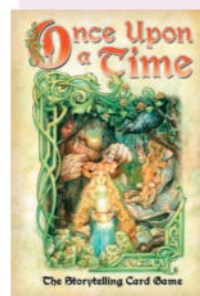
**3**  
“The player who most recently has dug a planting bed in their garden takes the Starting player token and becomes the Starting player”  
*Terra Mystica*



**4**  
“The player who has the worst day goes first”  
*Gloom*



**5**  
“The player with the most colourful clothing begins the game”  
*Hanabi*

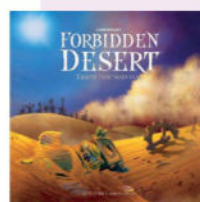


player with the longest beard”  
*Once Upon A Time*

**6**  
“Decide who will be the first storyteller. This could be the oldest player, the youngest player, or (as is traditional — at least among bearded game designers) the



**7**  
“Whoever can balance on one foot like a flamingo for the longest time, starts the game. If you can't agree, the youngest player rolls the die”  
*Animal Upon Animal*



**8**  
“The thirstiest player goes first”  
*Forbidden Desert*





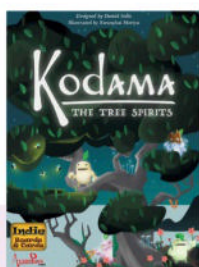
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"Whoever got up the earliest this morning goes first"  
**Smash Up**



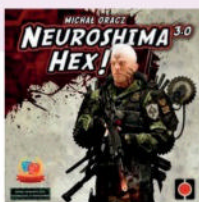
10

"The player who most recently hand-wrote a letter takes the first turn"  
**Love Letter**



11

"The player wearing the most green starts the game as the first player"  
**Kodama: The Tree Spirits**



12

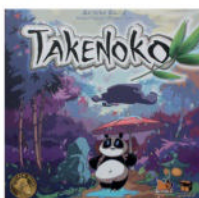
"The owner of the game starts a game session (becomes Player One). He may also choose a starting player or the starting

player may be chosen randomly"  
**Neuroshima Hex**



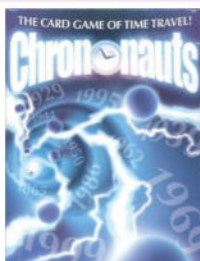
13

"The player who has read the most science fiction books goes first"  
**Android**



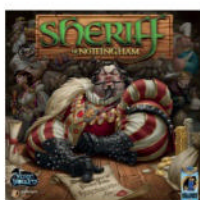
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"The tallest player starts the game"  
**Takenoko**



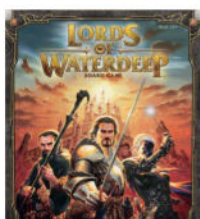
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"To determine who goes first, all players will attempt to guess the current time. Whoever comes closest starts the game"  
**Chrononauts**



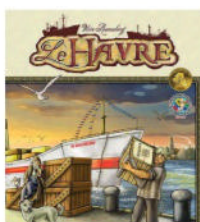
16

"The players with the highest value of actual cash on their person will be the first Sheriff"  
**Sheriff of Nottingham**



17

"The player who has most recently been to another city goes first"  
**Lords of Waterdeep**



18

"The Starting Player is the player who lives closest to water"  
**Le Havre**



19

"The most suspicious-looking player is the dealer in the first round"  
**Spyfall**



20

"Each player takes three animal cards from the draw deck as his starting hand. Then all players moo. The loudest moo'er will play first. The game is ready to begin!"  
**Black Sheep**







## SHOP SPOTLIGHT

# BADGER BADGER

We do some set building at Deptford's Badger Badger

Interview by **Christopher John Eggett**

**Tell us a little bit about how the store got started?**

We created Badger Badger to serve the London gaming community as a hybrid of a board game café and a pub. As both avid gamers and experienced pub managers, we were eager to make a space that everyone could enjoy, from casual players to hardcore gamers. In doing this we've put together a diverse library of classic and cutting edge games to play, a passionate and knowledgeable team on hand to help as well as a cosy space to meet at and try them out without the pressure of having to buy the games yourself. Deptford has excellent transport links and is a hub for young, creative people so it was the perfect place to start our passion project.

**What's it like being a FLGS in your area?**

Totally brilliant! Deptford has a vibrant and welcoming community who are kind, diverse and engaged with their neighbourhood. There are so many outstanding independent restaurants, shops to visit and local happenings to get involved with – a tabletop gaming spot was an obvious fit for such a well serviced area. The welcome has been warm, to say the least.

**What do you think makes your store unique?**

Our service and environment are what makes us special. We adore tabletop games, but the hobby can sometimes be a bit overwhelming.

The selection of great games to play is already massive and with so many exciting things coming out all the time, folks often don't have the time or budget to keep up. We have an extraordinarily switched on team of game enthusiasts ready to help you navigate the library based on what you like, make recommendations and even teach the simple games for you to play there and then. You can enjoy all of this and more in a comfortable pub environment with a massive, well curated drinks selection and a gorgeous Japanese street food menu. As the cherry on top, we are open day and night, seven days a week!

**What events do you run for the local gaming scene?**

We have weekly socials, *Magic: The Gathering* nights and Roleplaying Sessions, as well as game design events, mixer evenings for the Queer community and other special seasonal events. Our latest addition is weekly hardcore gaming nights every Sunday where the keenest gamers can go deep on some of the tougher games with like minded enthusiasts.

**What's been your favourite part of running the store so far?**

We have the rare privilege of watching the gaming community grow in front of us. Our customers are friends. Seeing them share their delight in gaming and make new connections in the process is deeply rewarding. Some of



them have even inadvertently found partners at our events.

**What are your plans for the future?**

Always more and better games of course. We've got *Blood on the Clocktower* evenings in the pipeline, as well as party game competitions, miniatures painting sessions and *Bloodbowl* tournaments. Targeted community events such as LGBTQ+ rpg nights and free after school gaming sessions for underprivileged young adults are also a high priority. Finally, we are teaming up with local publishers and designers to showcase the South East London game design scene. We hope to see you down here for a game. 🍷

**WHERE CAN I FIND IT?**

**Badger Badger**  
139-145 Deptford High Street  
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[www.badgerbadger.org/gaming](http://www.badgerbadger.org/gaming)





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# tabletop time machine

## 1966 PROPAGANDA

**T**he Propaganda Game, in the series of Wff'n Proof logic games developed by Layman E Allen some 60 years ago, is the antidote to the post-truth society we live in today.\* Nowadays we are, more than ever, exposed to a constant barrage of lies and misinformation generated largely by the advertising industry, so-called social media, and by populist newspapers and politicians.

All these sources employ language not so much to convey information as to force you into responding emotionally to aligning yourself with whatever they wish you to think, believe, and ultimately act upon. The aim of the Propaganda Game is to help you build up your defences by presenting you with statements representing various techniques of persuasion and inviting you to analyse and identify them.

An accompanying 88-page manual introduces 60 different techniques in ten different categories. Each game concentrates on one category, so you don't have to learn all 60 to start with. By the time you run out of the material provided you will be sufficiently expert to play the advanced game, in which you all come prepared with examples culled from real life sources.

The six categories are self-deception, misuse of language, irrelevance, exploitation, form (non-sequitur, etc), manoeuvre (ad hominem, etc). Under self-deception, the manual describes ten techniques for lulling you into it: Prejudice ('Politicians – they're all alike'); Academic detachment ('The arguments for are as strong as those against'); Drawing the line ('If you're not telling the truth you must be lying'); Not drawing the line ('If this, why not that?'); Conservatism/radicalism/moderatism ('That's how we've always done it'; 'We tried it before and it didn't work'); Rationalism ('The exam room was so hot I couldn't think straight'); Wishful thinking ('My son's bound to win after all the hard work he's put into it'); Tabloid thinking ('Evolution means we're descended from monkeys'); Casual oversimplification ('Without arms manufacturers there'd be no wars'); Inconceivability ('Why should I buy a raffle ticket? I never win anyway').

Besides the manual, there are two packs – one white, one orange – each of 20 example statements to be judged; a voting dial for each player; and a scoring chart to show



LEFT Propaganda components

when one player wins by first reaching 20 points. At each turn a sample statement is read out, you each decide which technique it is intended (by the authors of the game) to illustrate, and then secretly turn your voting dial to show the categorising number of your choice. Everyone whose selection matches the majority decision moves one space up the scoring chart, which runs from 0 to 20.

Note that the majority decision, or popular vote, is deemed correct. The manual is only consulted for the intended answer in case of an unbreakable tie (two say one thing and two another).

There are interesting refinements on this plan. A player who thinks the popular vote is wrong may make a 'bold challenge', in which case the manual is consulted. Alternatively, they may seek to persuade the others that they are wrong and, again, score extra if they succeed in doing so.

There's more, of course, but space precludes description.

Like others in the Wff'n Proof series, Propaganda is frankly an educational game, and which I don't see ever really going out of date. The Accelerated Learning Foundation, which owns the copyright, has released an online version <https://propagandagame.org/>

Try it, and boost your defences!

\*Not to be confused with Propaganda (2019), the game of competing ideologies.

**David Parlett** is a games inventor and historian, author of *The Oxford History of Card Games* and its sequel on board games, and a visiting professor of games design at the University of Suffolk.





# HOME OF BATTLEFIELDS



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SIZES**



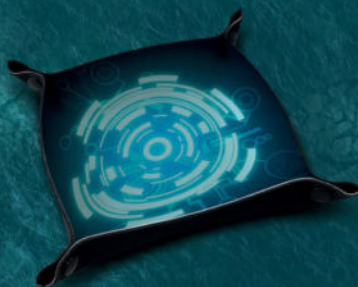
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